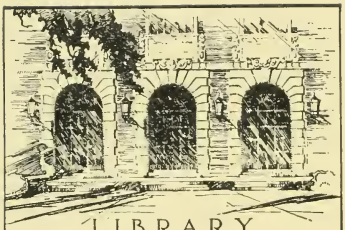

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TWO WORLDS OF FASHION.

LONDON:
ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

TWO WORLDS OF FASHION.

A Novel.

By CALTHORPE STRANGE.

'Have I dream'd the bearing of our knights
Tells of a manhood ever less and lower?
Or whence the fear lest this my realm, uprear'd
By noble deeds at one with noble vows,
From flat confusion and brute violences,
Reel back into the beast, and be no more?'

TENNYSON, *The Last Tournament.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE ST. STRAND.
1872.

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BOOK III.

Paying the Penalty.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

With almost inexpressible tenderness, Lady Pentarvon clung to her husband, as if she would shield him from the danger that awaited him by the interposition of her own trembling form. The tears flowed freely from Lord Pentarvon's eyes, as he returned her loving embraces in sad silence.

'My Blanche, my darling!' he murmured, 'you have read my letter, and you know that in return for your angelic forgiveness of my mad and cruel fault, I ask no explanation of you—seek to understand nothing of the circumstances in which your name has become involved; do not let us refer to them again.'

'On the contrary, Henry, I owe it to myself, completely as I know you believe in my

innocence, to tell you all I know concerning these circumstances that have brought upon us both so much suffering. In my entire life, Henry, there is nothing which I desire to keep from your knowledge, nothing which should cost me a blush to confess to you. Listen to me, then, dearest, and question me on any and every point that does not at once present itself clearly to your mind.'

Lord Pentarvon pressed her to his heart, as he asked:

'Do you know, my Blanche, of what you are accused?'

'I do not know, but I can guess,' she replied.

'A mysterious house—at St. John's-wood—is spoken of.'

'Such a house no doubt exists.'

'But—at least—it is—mere calumny that asserts you have been there?'

'Not wholly: I *have* been there.'

Lord Pentarvon looked into her fair and guileless face with wonder and a sinking of the heart. She kissed him with deep and

pitying tenderness, and begged him to come with her to her own room.

The candles in Lady Pentarvon's room were burnt low, attesting the long night-watch that she, like her husband, had been keeping. The moment she entered the room, she hurried to an ormolu-decorated cabinet of tulip-wood, from one of the drawers of which she took a letter, and handed it to Lord Pentarvon.

'Read this letter, darling—read it quickly,' she cried.

It was the anonymous letter which had induced her to go to the house in St. John's-wood.

'O, the infernal villain!' exclaimed Lord Pentarvon, when he had read through the infamous epistle.

'Now you begin to understand, Henry!' she cried.

She then told him how, almost out of her senses with despair and jealousy, she had decided on following the counsel given in the letter. How she had forgotten her purse,

and left her bracelet with the cabman in pledge for her fare; and, finally, of the scene with Gerald, ending with her escape from the house, and painful return home.

Again Lord Pentarvon pressed her to his heart, and wildly accused himself of being the first cause of all her undeserved sorrow. But she calmed him, and after a while, with a look of entreaty in her upturned face, said:

'All this matter is over now, dearest; and you will make me a promise, will you not?'

'Name it; you know that it is granted beforehand,' he replied.

'Promise me, Henry, that you will punish this bad man only with your contempt; promise me you will not seek to inflict upon him any other chastisement.'

The clouds which had well-nigh passed away from his brow, gathered again, and he slowly shook his head.

'Remember your promise, Henry!' she cried anxiously.

'My darling, ask anything else of me!—it

is impossible for me to do this. My honour is at stake.'

'Your honour!' she cried; how can *your* honour be compromised in this shameful affair? Who would dare to attack it?'

'Every one—my best friends themselves—if I were to do what you ask of me.'

'Your best friends! Good heavens! with what object? upon what pretext? If you choose to refrain from punishing this wretched man, by what right would any one venture to reproach you?'

'You are both right and wrong, dearest; no one would have the right to control or to blame me; but I have insulted this man publicly.'

'But had he not first insulted you?'

'I struck him in the card-room of the club in the presence of a dozen men of our acquaintance.'

'What then?'

'I owe *him* reparation, and he has demanded it. Under no pretext can I now decline to meet him.'

'O,' cried Lady Pentarvon, her terror dominated by her indignation, 'this is monstrous! What! is it not enough that you have cast back upon him the shame he vainly sought to cover you with, but you must further stake your honourable life against his worthless one? to fall a victim, perhaps, to some new and deadly treachery on his part?'

'Society has so decided.'

'Society!' she cried impetuously, 'I will not accept its laws! And do not talk to me of your honour. It is at stake, you say; what care I? It is not at stake with *me*—it is your life alone for which I am in fear!' She threw herself at his knees, and embraced them wildly. 'Swear to me—you must, you must, Henry!—that you will not fight with this infamous man!'

Lord Pentarvon raised her tenderly, and soothed her with caresses. When she was somewhat calmer, he said:

'My darling wife, you break my heart—and in vain; I cannot, I dare not, promise you what you ask. But have no fear. O,

believe me, never more than at this moment has the thought of life been dear to me! Trust me, love; my life, so precious in the hope it bears with it of a future of inestimable happiness, I shall know well how to guard.'

Nothing which she could urge seemed likely to move the firm conviction of Lord Pentarvon's mind that his life was in no danger; and after a while she ceased to entreat him. She armed herself with resignation and tried to appear calm, though her heart was torn with anxiety In this manner the rest of the night passed, for she would not lose him from her sight till the latest moment of parting was come.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ACCOUNT FOR SETTLEMENT.

Could the distressed pair have known how strangely fortune was working in their behalf, they might have spared themselves the agonies of that eventful night.

Reckless depravity, like that of Gerald's, is sure, sooner or later, to be called to account. Ill-deeds, like wild-fowl, still come home to roost. A careless spark explodes at last the magazine that has escaped a thousand perils. From a side least of all expected came the first sharp taste of chastisement to Sir Gerald Dalbright.

It had chanced that, on the occasion of one of his visits to Seraphine some few weeks previous to the concoction of the abortive scheme to ensnare Lady Pentarvon, Gerald had set eyes upon the little lace-mender he had once

seen, months before, at the Crystal Palace. He had little difficulty in ascertaining her address and the particulars of her position, and ultimately formed a plan by which to entice her to his house in Mayfair. The method he adopted was to send her a note, requesting her to call, at seven o'clock on a certain evening, upon *Lady* Dalbright, who desired to give her some work to do.

Now, as the reader already knows, the young girl was engaged to be married to an honest and high-spirited young butcher, who, very unfortunately for the nefarious scheme of Sir Gerald Dalbright, happened to be slightly acquainted with that gentleman's valet, and also, to some extent, with the evil reputation which his master had achieved. In the face of all he had been told of Gerald's ways of living, the actuality of a *Lady* Dalbright appeared to him much more than merely doubtful.

John Stedman strongly suspected that mischief was intended towards the girl whom he was about to make his wife, and he resolved to

put his suspicion to the test of inquiry. After receiving from his intended a serious promise that she would not go to the house to which she was directed in the letter—that she would not go out of doors even—before his return, he went straight to Gerald's house and inquired for Lady Dalbright.

The footman in plain livery, who answered him, laughed as he said:

'There ain't a *Lady* Dalbright at all; you want *Sir* Gerald, I s'pose?'

'No,' replied John Stedman, looking at the note, which he had brought with him for possible use—'no: it's written here plain enough, *Lady* Dalbright.'

''Tain't at this house, then; an' I can't say I have ever heard of such a party.'

'Perhaps it's Sir Gerald Dalbright's mother,' suggested Stedman.

'Dead, to the best of my belief,' answered the footman.

'Or his wife?'

'Not if he knows it,' replied the footman with a wink. 'He's a out-an'-out bachelor.'

'Ah,' said Stedman, 'then of course it isn't likely, is it?'

'Not at all, I should say,' observed the footman graciously.

'Is he at home now?' asked Stedman.

'No, out in his mail-phaeton—Hyde-park, you know. Won't be home for an hour or two. Only just in time to dress before going out to dinner at his Club.'

'Won't see anybody then, of course?'

'Wouldn't spare a minute to shake hands with the ghost of his father. If you've got anything you want to say to him, I should advise you to write. I won't promise as you'll get a answer; but whether you do, or whether you don't, writing's your only chance.

'Much obliged to you for telling me so; I'll think of it,' replied Stedman.

John Stedman played his part so well that the footman, from whom he had so ingeniously drawn all the information he was seeking, had not the shadow of a suspicion as to the motives of his questioner. With a quick step and determined air he hastened to his

lodgings, which were not far from Sir Gerald's house, and armed himself with two light sticks of ground-ash such as drovers use.

About half-past six o'clock he again presented himself to Sir Gerald's footman, but this time he inquired for that gentleman's French valet, Monsieur Larose. At the moment of his arrival he found Monsieur Larose amusing himself by spelling out as much as he could of the day's news from the evening papers. The prospect of a chat with an unexpected visitor had superior attractions for him, however, and he invited Stedman up to a sort of closet or antechamber, commanding a view of the landing on the drawing-room floor, and of which he enjoyed the undisputed use.

'Ah, if I had known it was you, *mon ami*, who come to seek the Lady Dalbright, that that ignorant pig down there below tell me of, I would have told you right, you know, eh? What is it about this Lady Dalbright?—very droll. Look you: never is there a house in Mayfair where it is not so likely you will find a milady Dalbright.'

Monsieur Larose chuckled gaily as he made this remark; but he did not notice that, while his visitor also laughed, he at the same time clutched nervously at the ash-sticks in his strong right hand.

'I find it was all a mistake of mine,' said Stedman, putting on the simplest air he could assume. 'The party I ought to have inquired for was your guv'nor.'

'Why did you not ask for me? then you would have been at once put all to right.'

'Didn't think of it at the time, that's where it was,' replied Stedman.

'Well, and now you have found your man is not a milady—ah, what is it that you want of him?'

'I've got a letter for him—a letter to be given into his own hands—you understand? The person who sent me with it told me to be sure and not let anybody else see it.'

'O, then I understand it just as well as if I had read it myself with both my eyes shut,' said Monsieur Larose, with another hearty chuckle. 'Say, then—is it not from a pretty

little milliner — a young girl? I know all about that. But the pig of a fellow below, he is not fit to open the door for a sweeper of crossings! You have brought a little note from that young girl, instead of that young girl herself coming; and that pig had no more his wits in his head than truly a oyster.'

'I see,' said Stedman; 'you was expecting a young girl to come. And if she had come?'

'Why, then, see you, it would have been so much the better for Sir Gerald.'

'And so much the worse for her,' added Stedman. 'But the letter I've got for him comes from a grand lady.'

'Aha!' cried Larose with redoubled interest; 'is it truly so? For example—may one ask her name?'

'I should like to tell you, but I mustn't.'

'A very great secret, then, is it?'

'Very. How long is your guv'nor likely to be before he comes home?'

'Not many minutes now,' replied Monsieur Larose, looking at a clock on the mantelpiece, which indicated that the time was then a

quarter-past six. 'Who can this grand lady be who send letters to my little devil of a master by my cautious friend Stedman?' he said to himself; and then added, 'Let us see if I can't unloose my cautious friend's tongue.'

He crossed the room, and, taking a key from his waistcoat-pocket, unlocked a deep cupboard which opened from the floor nearly to the ceiling. From this receptacle he produced a bottle of fine brandy and two glasses.

'Allow me to offer you a glass of brandy of a first quality, which I keep in my convenient closet here for my very particular friends,' he said, filling the glasses and handing one to Jack. 'Never in your life will you be likely to drink a better brandy, my word of honour. A whole bottle of it, you can drink it like water. It is so good, it cannot hurt you.'

Monsieur Larose's design was to loosen his friend's tongue on the subject of the mysterious letter which he pretended to be the bearer of; but this design completely failed in execution, for Stedman, having a stern purpose in view, in spite of the apparent simplicity

and transparency of his manner, drank only so much as he knew he could carry safely, and at the same time serve the purpose of throwing Monsieur Larose off his guard.

At length, just as the hands of the clock pointed to seven, the sound of horses stopping before the house and of the opening of the street-door indicated the return of Gerald. Monsieur Larose hastily seized the bottle and glasses and plunged with them into the closet.

The action suggested to Jack's mind an idea on which he instantly proceeded to act. He sprang across the room, closed the door of Monsieur Larose's closet upon him, and gave a double turn to the lock. Monsieur Larose was caught like a rat in a trap.

CHAPTER X.

NEMESIS ARMED WITH AN ASH-STICK.

Gerald ascended the stairs with a quick step, and on reaching the landing found the doorway of the ante-room filled by the form of a stranger in place of that of Monsieur Larose.

'Who may you be, and what are you doing here, my good fellow?' he inquired in a tone of curiosity rather than of suspicion or alarm.

'I've been waiting for your return, Sir Gerald—that's all I've been doing; who I am you shall know, if you'll have the goodness to let me have five minutes' talk with you,' replied Stedman, putting the greatest restraint upon himself.

'I'm not in the habit of giving interviews to people who refuse to tell me their names,' said Gerald, moving towards the drawing-

room. 'You had better explain to one of my servants what your business with me is.'

'I'd rather not do that,' replied Stedman. 'My business *is* with you, but with you alone. You won't be much wiser when I have told you my name.'

'Perhaps; but I must know it nevertheless, before I hold any farther conversation with you.'

'As you please. My name is Stedman—John Stedman.'

Among other information which Gerald had had brought to him, concerning the young work-girl whom he desired to decoy to his house, was the intelligence that she was engaged to be shortly married to a young man named Stedman. The moment Stedman mentioned his name, therefore, Gerald scented danger; but, instantly on his guard, he affected not to recognise the name given by his unwelcome visitor.

'Stedman!' he repeated. 'Never heard the name before. Good-evening, Mr. Stedman. I'm very much pressed for time. If you've

anything farther to communicate, my servants will give you every attention.'

He passed into the drawing-room, and was about to close the door after him; but before he could carry his intention into execution, Stedman dashed into the room, closed the door behind him, and set his back against it.

'Look here, Sir Gerald Dalbright,' he said in a determined tone. 'I have told you who I am; will you give me the interview I have asked for?'

'It seems very much as if it were a question of taking, rather than of giving,' replied Gerald with a short uneasy laugh. 'What do you want with me?'

'Do you know anything about this letter?' demanded Stedman, handing the letter which had been sent to his sweetheart.

'What is that to you, Mr. Stedman?'

'This,' cried Stedman, his blood gradually warming—'the young person to whom that blackguard letter was addressed is to become my wife a week hence.'

'You don't expect me to exhibit any ex-

traordinary amount of astonishment, I suppose, Mr. Stedman, on receipt of this piece of intelligence?'

'I only expect of you one thing,' replied Stedman; 'it is, that you will give up your scoundrelly designs against this honest and respectable girl.'

'That is your expectation, is it, Mr. Stedman? You have my free permission to expect that, and to indulge in any other expectations you please.'

'You must give me a better answer than that, Sir Gerald Dalbright; and remember that when you attack the honour of her whom I am going to make my wife, you attack *my* honour!'

'My good fellow, you are very amusing, I assure you,' replied Gerald insolently; 'but I haven't time to enjoy any more of your fun at present. Once more, good-evening.'

Stedman's forehead grew to be crimson with anger, fast passing beyond control.

'Take care!—take care, Sir Gerald Dalbright!' he cried.

'Of what, pray?' demanded Gerald contemptuously.

'Of me, who have submitted to nearly enough of your impertinence and insult!—to me, who am not your valet nor your flunky, but your equal—yes, your equal—who will treat you as you deserve!'

On hearing this threat, Gerald became livid with rage.

'Leave my house instantly, vagabond!' he cried, advancing a step, and raising the riding-whip, which he had retained in his hand.

The young butcher sprang back.

'Don't touch me!' he cried; 'don't touch me, or by heaven—'

But Gerald was insensible to danger. Rage had completely mastered his reason. He rushed upon Stedman, and lashed him savagely once or twice with the whip. A moment afterwards the weapon was wrenched from his hand, and flung to the other end of the room.

There was then a moment's pause, during which the two men stood panting and glaring

at each other like wild beasts. Suddenly Stedman, who was the nearer of the two to the door, turned and locked it.

'You yourself have chosen to come to blows,' he said, again facing Gerald; 'let it be so. I can make myself better understood in that way than I seem likely to do by words.'

He threw down upon the table, near which Gerald was standing, one of the two sticks he had brought with him.

'There is a fairer weapon for you than the one I've taken from you; see whether you can make better use of it.'

Gerald could hardly refrain from bursting into a laugh.

'What!' he cried, 'do you really think I am going to fight you with sticks?—a duel!'

'Call it what you like; but, if you do not wish to be beaten like a cur, defend yourself as well as you can; for I swear you'll find it no laughing matter *now*, Sir Gerald Dalbright. You won't take up your stick? Just as you please; but I give you fair warning that I in-

tend to count five, and when I have done that, I shall begin to lay-on to you with the stick I hold in my hand, whether you defend yourself or not. Now you know exactly what you have to expect.—One !'

Gerald curled his upper lip disdainfully.

'Two!' cried Stedman.

'Pish!' cried Gerald, shrugging his shoulders.

'Three!—In less than half a minute you will feel the weight of my stick, Sir Gerald Dalbright.—Four!'

The stick which he had so far held loosely he now raised into a striking position; that which he had intended for Gerald still lay on the table where he had flung it.

Gerald was under the infatuated belief that Stedman would not dare to strike him; from this conviction arose a great part of the assurance he exhibited. But at the sight of the threatening attitude assumed by his antagonist, his confidence gradually declined.

Stedman allowed a few seconds to pass, but then, seeing that nothing but a serious

aggression would induce his adversary to defend himself, cried,

'Five!'

As he uttered the word, he brought his stick sharply down upon Gerald's shoulder. It was repugnant to his feelings to strike an unarmed man, and therefore his first blow was comparatively light, but nevertheless it made Gerald wince.

'I've given you fair warning,' he said. 'That's a mere touch; but now, look out, the play is going to begin in earnest.'

Gerald no longer shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. The sharp sting of the blow he had received left him no room to doubt the seriousness of the affair he was engaged in. Hesitation was altogether out of the question; he must defend himself, or be beaten like a cringing dog. He snatched up the stick that was lying on the table, and put himself into an attitude of defence.

Stedman uttered an exclamation of triumphant satisfaction. He could now, without repugnance, serve out the chastisement which

he considered himself completely justified in inflicting on the man who had sought to do him so infamous a wrong.

With the strength of a young Hercules he whirled his stick about the head and body of his antagonist, who, dazed by the intricate play of the other's skilfully-wielded weapon, could do little in the way of guarding himself from the stinging blows that every instant descended upon some part of his body.

Gerald was suffering horribly, and rapidly losing both his strength and presence of mind, while at the same time he was becoming almost frantic with rage at his own inability to give any return for the punishment he was receiving. With a cry like that of a wild animal rushing upon its foe, he raised his stick with both hands, and dashed in upon his antagonist; but his efforts were in vain, not one of his blows took effect.

At last his powers were exhausted. A mist rose before his eyes, he breathed with extreme difficulty, and reeled like a drunken man under the blows which his antagonist

showered upon him with redoubled intensity. One of these blows dashed the stick from his enfeebled hand, and left him wholly without defence.

Under these circumstances, certainly, John Stedman might have performed an act of high and chivalrous generosity, and spared his vanquished and already terribly punished adversary; but moderation in victory is held to be a great and beautiful virtue, even among the heroes of fable—among ordinary mortals it is rarely practised.

John Stedman had, unfortunately for Gerald, become more and more excited as he pursued the work of punishment. The intoxication of satisfied vengeance had mounted to his head. He resembled a vicious horse that has taken the bit between his teeth and bolted, and that nothing can stop till his rage has spent itself.

Heedless, therefore, of the condition of his adversary, John Stedman continued to rain blows upon him, till at length, uttering a cry between a sob and a groan, Gerald threw up

his hands in vague deprecation, reeled, and fell insensible on the floor.

Then only did John Stedman pause.

'The deuce!' he said to himself, 'I'm afraid I've given him a little too strong a dose of ash-twig! He richly deserved it, the young scoundrel; but it would be awkward for me if—O, no, he won't die of it. The lesson was one he's long been in want of, I'll bet a wager; let's hope it'll do him good for the rest of his days.'

Having delivered himself of these few appropriate remarks, he unlocked the door and descended the stairs. Nobody was in the hall to obstruct his exit from the house: the footman, after letting in Sir Gerald, having retired to the kitchen to take his tea, and consequently out of earshot of all that had been going on in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

It was nearly half an hour after John Stedman's departure before Gerald recovered his lost consciousness, and succeeded in ringing for assistance. The inquiry which he made for his valet led to the discovery and release of Monsieur Larose.

Gerald was conveyed to his bed and a doctor sent for, who pronounced the case a very serious one. At Gerald's request Lord Carleon was informed that an accident had occurred, which would prevent the proposed journey to Paris on the following day.

On receiving this intelligence Lord Carleon instantly repaired to Gerald's house, where he ascertained from the doctor whom he met there something of the nature of the occurrence which had thus put a stop to the in-

tended duel. As early as possible, after having satisfied himself that Gerald's condition precluded all chance of his being able to make any farther arrangements on his behalf, he proceeded to inform Lord Pentarvon of the actual state of affairs.

To Lady Pentarvon the relief was immense, bringing with it as it did the possibility of her immediate departure with her husband from London and its painful experiences, to the midst of scenes in which hitherto she had known nothing but unalloyed happiness. Scarcely less delightful and full of hope to Lord Pentarvon, after the terrible emotions of the past few days, was the prospect of at once getting back to the serenity of his country house.

From the first, Gerald's case had been pronounced to be one of a serious nature. For weeks he lay in peril of his life; and when at length the more immediately dangerous symptoms subsided, it became manifest that certain effects of the injuries he had received would be carried with him to the grave. His legs

were both paralysed, and there appeared but little hope of his ever recovering their use.

To all questions put to him as to the circumstances under which he had been subjected to such violent treatment, he obstinately returned evasive answers. Hence it was that his unmerciful antagonist escaped being made to answer to the law for his too rough-and-ready method of settling accounts.

John Stedman was not the only creditor by whom Sir Gerald Dalbright was painfully and unexpectedly called upon for a settlement. He had so far recovered as to be able to bear occasional removal from his bed to a sofa in his room, when one fine day he was informed that the first of four acceptances, each for five thousand pounds, drawn by him in favour of Mrs. Delcome, otherwise Seraphine, had been presented for payment at his bankers'.

Gerald was astounded, and at first thought that one of the dreams that had haunted him in his hours of fever had returned to his mind. But he soon found that the matter was beyond doubt—that he had been tricked by Seraphine

in the scene in which she had pretended to destroy the acceptances she was now putting into circulation.

Boiling with indignation, he wrote to her to come to him immediately, and sent the note by hand. In less than an hour Seraphine, dressed with consummate taste and looking her best, was ushered into his presence.

'So sorry to hear you have been ill,' she said, the moment she entered the room; 'hadn't the least notion you were so *very* ill.'

'Never mind my illness,' he replied sharply, 'but tell me what this means.'

He handed her a letter he had just received from his lawyer, whom he had at once consulted as to the course he ought to take.

'O yes,' she said, after carelessly looking at the letter; 'about the first of those acceptances of yours.'

'Well, what about them?' demanded Gerald.

'Nothing remarkable that I know,' she replied. 'Finding myself in want of some ready-money the other day, I had to get them dis-

counted—that's all. I hope, of course, it won't put you to any inconvenience.'

Gerald felt nearly as much stunned as if she had struck him on the head with a mallet.

'But—but,' he stammered, 'I thought you burned those acceptances.'

'At first I fully intended to do so,' replied Seraphine; 'but on second thoughts—which you know are always considered to be best—I determined to burn them only in effigy. I was so much in love with you about that time, if you remember, it seemed like holding security for your constancy.'

'Then it is out of jealousy you have made use of these acceptances?' demanded Gerald, a ray of hope springing out of the still active fount of his vanity.

'Not the least in the world,' cried Seraphine quickly. 'My love for you lasted but a very short time.'

'Then the affair means simply an infamous abuse of confidence!' exclaimed Gerald indignantly.

Seraphine looked at him directly in the eyes as she answered:

'You talk of an infamous abuse of confidence, Sir Gerald Dalbright. Do you accuse me of stealing your acceptances?'

'I did not say that.'

'Please to recollect that I did not even ask you for them; but you wrote them and sent them to me without so much as once consulting me on the subject. *Your* intention, then, was to play-off on me a scandalous trick—allow me to use the right word—to *rob* me.'

'No, no,' cried Gerald; 'but—'

'But what?'

'I thought you had destroyed my acceptances.'

'Well, you find now that I have not done so. What then?'

'You intend to demand payment?'

'No, not I, but the persons with whom I have negotiated them.'

'I'll not pay one of them!' exclaimed Gerald passionately.

'Ah,' replied Seraphine, 'you are not the

first man who has talked loudly in that extremely childish fashion, but who has paid very quietly in the end.' She rose, and added with an indescribable contemptuousness of tone and gesture: 'As this is probably the last time I shall ever again have an opportunity of telling you what I think of you, I will avail myself of it effectually: Sir Gerald Dalbright, you are simply a vulgar scoundrel!' And without another word she walked out of the door, and a few moments later the sound of her brougham wheels died away upon Gerald's ears.

Against the opinion of his legal advisers Gerald insisted on contesting payment of his acceptances. The case was tried: the whole scandalous affair was made public; Seraphine was declared to be a worthless creature, Gerald entirely unworthy of sympathy. Judgment was given in favour of the holders of the acceptances, who succeeded in making it appear that, in discounting them for Mrs. Delcome, they had acted with perfect *bona fides*.

As Seraphine had predicted, Gerald paid

the money, having to raise it at a great sacrifice on the security of his estate.

Mortified, pillaged, broken in health, ruined in reputation, and crippled for the remainder of his days, he retired to his house in Somersetshire; not to repent the past, but to curse the folly which had made it so disastrous to him.

By one man at least he was held in recollection—Lord Carleon, who had tried to turn him from the way which he had early seen would lead him to destruction. In the heart of this one man—in spite of all the bitter experiences that told against it—there still existed a spark of almost affectionate regard for the unhappy young man.

The recollection of how deeply Gerald had inspired him with interest from the moment he had first beheld him, haunted his mind, coupled with the memory of his lost Marguerite. The desire to see him once again, after a while became irresistible, and he set off for Dalbright Hall, without advertising him of the intended visit.

It was a bright evening when Lord Carleon reached the railway-station, some mile and a half from the Hall, and the beauty of the scenery tempted him to walk the distance in preference to being driven in a country fly. Leaving his luggage to be sent for later, he took the field-paths pointed out to him.

The way he was directed to follow led through a churchyard, from which a gate opened into the park in which Dalbright Hall stood. Arrived at this point, a fancy—an instinct it may have been—led him to walk round the church and to read the inscriptions on some of the gravestones. Nothing of special interest, however, met his eye.

He had reached the park-gate, and was about passing through it out of the churchyard, when his attention was attracted by a handsome mausoleum which stood a few paces from the footpath he was following. For a moment he hesitated as to whether he should take a nearer view of this object or pass on his way, but ended by going up to it.

A glance at the inscription which first met his sight told him that he was standing before the family tomb of the Dalbrights, generations of whom had found their last resting-place within its sculptured walls.

Suddenly his eyes rested upon an inscription of recent date, and a cry that was almost a scream of agony broke from his lips. The inscription which had produced this terrible impression ran thus:

'Sacred to the memory of Marguerite Dalbright, *née* Simon, the beloved and honoured wife of Sir Gerald Dalbright, Bart.'

Yes, at last he had found her, to know that in this world they could never again meet, to learn for certain what the mysterious promptings of his heart had long ago told him, that Gerald—vicious, heartless, and lost to honour—was his own son.

Like one walking in his sleep, he retraced his steps to the railway-station, and at once returned to town.

For the sins and errors of his youth was not the immeasurable agony of that day a

sufficient retribution? Judges more merciful might have thought it so; not he who had passed sentence on himself.

A terrible sentence it was—one that sent a thrill of awe through the heart of the gay and elegant society of which he had been one of the chiefs.

Lord Carleon became in religion Frère Dominique of the order of La Trappe.

THE END.

COMMON AS EARTH.

A Village Story.

'For when th' oppress'd is once up to the chin,
Quite overhead all help to thrust him in.'

DRAYTON.

COMMON AS EARTH.

CHAPTER I.

OF ABBOT'S-NOOK, THE 'GREAT HOUSE' AND GREAT PEOPLE THERE.

FIVE-AND-FORTY years ago, in the days of the 'Magnet,' 'Express,' and 'Tally-ho!' the village of Abbot's-Nook was thirteen hours eastward from London. Ten or fifteen years later, the railroad—mighty and generally beneficent innovator—came upon it; found it a worn-out place, slowly but surely sinking into decay, its people ignorant, poor, and apathetic; with iron powers swept the whole of it away; rebuilt it—trebling its original size—and now holds it with an iron grasp, a noisy, busy, thriving place, without a vestige of its former self, except its name, which, we

are bound to confess, is not precisely that here given to it.

Abbot's-Nook, at the earlier time to which we have referred, was like many another English village—long, straggling, built in patches, and having a tendency to stray up divers roads that turned off right and left from the High-street, or rather road. In the so-called High-street were located all the more important trading establishments, and the only two that were strictly professional—the doctor's and the lawyer's. It contained, also, the Red Lion Inn, next door to the forge of Master Eben. Smith, who, by the bye, after blowing cheerfully at his bellows all the week, blowed with stout lungs, and by way of pious recreation, first clarionet at church on Sundays.

A few yards from the inn, at the corner of one of the off-turning roads, was the genteel house of the village, the residence of the family with the 'little independency;' the head of which, Mr. Gattens (who, with Mrs. Gattens and two fair-complexioned daughters, both well-grown young women, had come to live

there from 'a distant part of the county') with Mr. Sifter the lawyer, and Mr. Squills the doctor, to form a *quorum*, sat nightly in the neatly-sanded parlour of the Red Lion Inn, to discuss and regulate the politics, religion, morals, literature, and science, pertaining to the whole village—saving always, and reverently excepting, the 'Great House.'

At the opposite side of the street, at the corner of another road, was the 'Emporium,' as it would now possibly be called, of Master Josiah Grimes, who was content to be described on his shop-front as a General Dealer. 'General' the good man's dealings appeared to be, for he offered for sale every conceivable thing, ranging within the limits of ploughshares, tinder-boxes, and pocket-handkerchiefs, as articles of ordinary local requirement; bacon, corn, treacle, salt, and tea, as items of primary necessity; and, as miscellaneous wares, snuff, chimneypots, nails, and acidulated drops; all these things exclusive—as was whispered, out of Josiah's hearing, of course—of a good many more excisable commodities that had

never paid duty into the national treasury, much as the money was wanted there. The butcher's and the baker's shops also stood in the High-street which boasted besides a second place of convivial resort—the Plough; a very much less genteel, but, as its frequenters thought, very much more jolly, place of entertainment than the Red Lion Inn aforementioned.

Hemming in the village on three sides were farm-lands, and scattered thinly along the roads leading to the homesteads were labourers' cottages, variously poor and unpicturesque. The church, usually so important a feature in village pictures, stood about a mile removed from the village proper, and appeared to have been built rather with reference to the convenience of the adjoining parish than to that of its legitimate congregation.

After the church, which was neither very old nor very new, and had nothing about it, in respect of architecture or associations, to commend it to special notice, there remains only the 'Great House' to be spoken of, to make

our rapid survey of Abbot's-Nook complete—that is to say, complete enough for the purposes of our story.

From *Beauties of the County of* ——— we condense the following enthusiastic description of

'THE HALL AT ABBOT'S-NOOK, SEAT OF JOSEPH ALLGRIP, ESQUIRE.

'This magnificent house, one of the architectural glories of our county—we might indeed say of our country—was built in the reign of James II. by Reginald Eldford, twice Mayor of Norwich during the succeeding reign, and, with the fine estate surrounding it, remained in possession of his descendants down to about three years ago, when it passed (by purchase, we believe) into the hands of its present estimable owner; by whom, at a prince-like outlay of money, and with matchless taste, the building has just been entirely renovated and greatly enlarged. . . . We have spoken of the Hall as one of the glories of our county: in truth, we find it impossible to convey in words anything like an adequate

impression of the richness and beauty of its architecture, the grandeur of its proportions, or of the charming scenery by which it is environed. The park, in the centre of which it stands, is of noble extent, and, besides containing some of the most magnificent timber trees in the kingdom, possesses within its boundaries an infinite variety of landscape beauties —hill and dale, woodland and lawn. From the broad terrace in front of the mansion, the spectator commands a view which, for exten, and diversity, is simply indescribable. . . . . Of the interior of the house, of the multitude of objects of worth and beauty which adorn its numerous apartments, we shall attempt no description; it must suffice for us to say that the Allgrip collection of pictures by the best masters, selected by their wealthy proprietor, will ever remain a splendid monument of his taste, learning, and liberality. . . . In concluding this brief and wholly inadequate notice, we cannot refrain from adding that, great as has been the expenditure upon the house and park, the hospitality and bound-

less benevolence of their princely owner have known no abatement; and we are sure that we only faintly express the sentiments of all who have the advantage and happiness of knowing that gentleman, when we say that he is a blessing to the village and an honour to the county in which he has been pleased to take up his residence.'

Neat, though a little over-fervid in tone, this 'tag' might pass unquestioned by the credulous or unsuspecting reader of the *Beauties*. The information conveyed in the 'List of Subscribers' inserted in that high-priced volume is calculated, however, to suggest something like a doubt as to the absolute clean-handedness of the fluent panegyrist of Joseph Allgrip, Esquire. The information alluded to is that the name of the 'princely' blessing to his village, &c., is down for twenty copies of the *Beauties* which, it might be farther noted, is five copies more than are marked against the name of Lord Acres, the largest landed proprietor in the county.

Joseph Allgrip was, in truth, neither an honour nor a blessing to the village of Abbot's-Nook; he was not the sort of man to be either the one or the other. What he really was, was one of those clever money-getters who are envied and held up as examples by less successful operators in the science of gain; that is to say, he had come to London with barely a sovereign in his pocket, and retired with a splendid fortune.

A raw country lad, with a small box of clothes and a much more scantily-furnished purse, but with an uncommonly sharp eye for the main chance, he had been taken, soon after his arrival in town, as an under-strapper into one of the warehouses of Alderman Goldthumb, a leading army contractor. His wages at the outset hardly sufficed to keep him, yet —as he boasted in after years—he put away money from the very first. There was nothing he was above doing; he was indefatigable to a marvel. His master—who prided himself on 'having risen from nothing'—was not slow to recognise his merit, and advanced

him steadily, until one fine morning he found himself promoted into the counting-house. According to his own view of life, it was a lucky day, that on which he first crossed the threshold of Alderman Goldthumb's place of business: it is at least certain that, when he finally recrossed it, he was a richer man than ever his master had been, and worth several 'plums.'

Goldthumb had met with never-changing good fortune, had never lost money by a contract, and had never been known to have an estimate rejected; facts on which men in the same line of business as himself commented freely, and not on all occasions favourably. The upshot of his speculations was that he grew rapidly rich.

Having neither kith nor kin, as far as he knew or cared, he had reached nearly sixty years of age without ever seriously thinking of marrying. At forty, he argued that he had quite enough to do to think of business; and at sixty, that he stood in no need of a wife, while he had a housekeeper who managed his home

to perfection at half the expense. Ungraceful as this reasoning was, it was admitted by all who took an interest in the matter, that Goldthumb had an unquestionable right to be satisfied with his domestic arrangements, and that his housekeeper was certainly all that could be desired—in a housekeeper.

The lady in question, Miss Betsy Witlaw —or, as she was always addressed, Mrs. Betsy —had entered the alderman's service at twenty, and had been with him twenty years, during ten of which she had filled the important office above named. Constantly studying to please her bachelor master, she had been so far successful that he would as soon have thought of parting with his business as with her services. She was fully aware of this, but no one ever witnessed in her the least air of presumption on account of her master's favour. Her conduct, in short, was held to be a model of propriety.

Mrs. Betsy was tolerably good-looking, had saved money, and was therefore looked upon by the rising Joseph as the very woman for

his wife. He told her so. Personally he was unobjectionable to her, and she had not a word to say in disparagement of his prospects; but she gave him clearly to understand that nevertheless his suit was not acceptable. There was no pretence of love on his part, but her refusal was a blow to him, as the phrase is. He soon recovered from its effects, however, and confessed to himself that she had been perfectly in the right.

Very shortly after the occurrence of this event, of which Goldthumb knew nothing, the alderman began to notice a change in his housekeeper's manner; not the least falling-off in respect or in attention to his comfort; on the contrary, it appeared to him that her assiduities actually increased.

For some time he failed to detect the true nature of the change; but at length he began to understand that Mrs. Betsy was daily growing more and more reserved towards him. She seemed anxiously to anticipate his least want; the dishes he liked best were dressed to perfection under her superintendence, and she

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was continually surprising him with dainties prepared by her own hands. He was never tired of praising her, but the more he praised her the more determined appeared to grow her extraordinary reserve of manner. He noticed particularly that, after carving for him at dinner, she took the earliest opportunity for retiring from his presence, instead of staying to fill his wine for him and to chat awhile, as she had been accustomed to do. He became uncomfortable, and resolved to fathom the mystery of his housekeeper's altered mood.

In answer to direct questions, she affected to assure him that nothing had occurred to cause any change in her manner; and, for a few days, she appeared to be more than restored to herself—more familiar than he had ever known her to be; but he suspected that she was merely attempting by these means to hide the causes of her former reserve. The affair worried him excessively.

One evening at dinner, as Mrs. Betsy was helping him to the tid-bit of his most favoured

dish, he saw that she trembled—that her eyes were red, as if she had been recently weeping. For once in his aldermanic life he let the dinner go away almost untasted. With the cloth Mrs. Betsy left the room, as it appeared to him scarcely able to sustain herself. What did all this mean? He wheeled his chair round in front of the fire and looked straight into the glowing coals, as if for explanation.

He was not left long in suspense. A servant placed a letter in his hand—a letter in the handwriting of Mrs. Betsy, and running thus:

'Honoured Sir,—Circumstances have occurred which make it impossible for me to continue to fill the situation in which I have so long had the happiness to serve you. I respectfully beg that, with as little delay as may suit your convenience, you will be so good as to engage some one to relieve me of the duties which I can no longer have the happiness to perform.—Your honoured, dutiful, and ever-grateful servant,

'Betsy Witlaw.'

Scarcely waiting to finish reading this mysterious epistle, the amazed alderman violently rang the bell, and ordered Mrs. Betsy to be sent to him instantly. He was agitated—very much agitated; and when his housekeeper, with faltering steps, entered the room, he rose hastily and placed a chair for her close beside his own.

'Good God, Mrs. Betsy!' he cried, 'what is all this? Sit down—sit down. Now tell me what all this means, for I insist on knowing. Leave me!—God bless my soul!'

Mrs. Betsy remained silent, but energetically applied her handkerchief to her eyes.

'I — good heavens!' cried the alderman, becoming more and more troubled, and taking her disengaged hand—'I insist on having all this cleared up.'

Mrs. Betsy rubbed her eyes, removed her handkerchief, and then, after apparently struggling with her feelings, said:

'I hoped, sir, to be able to spare you the vexation which I fear my explanation may cause you; but since you command me—'

She seemed about to relapse into the use of her handkerchief, but the alderman brought her back with:

'For God's sake, Mrs. Betsy, do tell me what is the meaning of all this!'

'O sir,' cried Mrs. Betsy, 'I hardly know how to tell you. I would rather leave you in silence than—than—give you the annoyance—'

'But, I tell you, I insist!' cried Goldthumb, fast losing patience.

'O,' sobbed Mrs. Betsy, 'that after living under your honoured roof for twenty years, happy and grateful for your kindness and indulgence, and as I hoped respected by all, a malicious and censorious world should—should—O sir!'

'Should what?' insisted Goldthumb.

'Should misinterpret my humble endeavours to do my duty, and your kindness, and—and—'

The rest was lost behind the constantly-attending handkerchief of suffering Mrs. Betsy. But, as regards the effect produced upon the

alderman by so much of her address as reached his ears, it may be safely asserted that if a thunderbolt (to use the commonest figure of speech) had fallen at his feet, he would hardly have been more startled, and the excitement would have afforded him considerably less satisfaction.

What the effect of Mrs. Betsy's disclosure actually was may be indicated in few words. As we have said, Joseph Allgrip admitted that she did right in declining his offer of marriage. Within a month of the time when she made her tearful disclosure to her agitated master she became Mrs. Goldthumb, and three years later a widow, with no other incumbrances than a fortune of eight-and-forty thousand pounds (four per cents) and the contract business, worth at least as much more.

Goldthumb's death was, so to speak, life to Joseph Allgrip. Nothing was more reasonable than that his hopes should once more have turned towards Mrs. Betsy. There was a vast disparity between their fortunes; but Joseph had become, as managing clerk of the

defunct alderman, thoroughly conversant with the contract business, in fact identified with it; the widow, therefore, could not do better than trust its entire conduct to him. Joseph was necessary to her, a fact which he found many opportunities for impressing on her mind. She had no difficulty in deciding as to the course she should take; and, having decided, there was only to apprise Joseph of her resolution and to get through the customary period of weed-wearing.

In eighteen months from the worthy alderman's demise, the contract invoices were headed 'Allgrip, late Goldthumb.'

CHAPTER II.

THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF ALLGRIP.

There was not a fraction of love lost or gained by Joseph Allgrip or the widow by their marriage. Interest, they both knew, was at the bottom of it; but, for all that, they lived as decently together—nay, as comfortably—as the best of their neighbours. Their union had, in truth, this great advantage over tens of thousands contracted on the same basis: it was supported by the greatest possible confidence in each other.

In due season a son was born to them, and then their mutual fondness for their offspring stood instead of a more direct bond of affection. They named the child Marten, after some member of its mother's family. Years rolled away, the boy thrived, and, as he was their only child, was the pride and pleasure of

father and mother, who, perfectly agreeing in this respect as in all other matters, combined to spoil him in the completest sense of the term.

Faithful to his early instinct, Joseph Allgrip no sooner found himself master of large means than he bent all his energies to the acquirement of large and speedy gains. He not only pursued the contract business on the old extensive scale, but it was remarked that gradually he became a 'name on 'Change;' and it came to be generally known that a good mortgage was sure to be well entertained in his 'private' office. From common councilman he became alderman, looking forward to the mayoralty; for his rise to power had been so rapid that he could scarely have failed to be ambitious. The contemplation of this prospect was as agreeable to Mrs. Allgrip as to Joseph, and they were both resolved that, when the time came, they would make the Allgrip mayoralty memorable for its splendour.

Meanwhile, Joseph, sowing his gold with a perfect appreciation of the soil he was culti-

vating, reaped rapid harvests of gain, and laid up golden stores. The mayoralty and then retirement, that was the notion of both husband and wife.

As profitable as that of the whole of his contracts put together was the business transacted by Joseph Allgrip in his 'private' office.

Amongst the constant visitors to that murky little room—with its scant and seedy furniture, and its one dirty window looking into a patch of burying-ground, on the black grass of which not a direct ray of the sun had fallen for scores upon scores of years—one of the most constant was Felix Eldford, Esquire.

At the time of his introduction to Joseph Allgrip, Felix Eldford was a reckless undergraduate of Cambridge, wanting about a year of his majority. He had only a mother living —a mother who loved him and lived in him, believing him to be all that a fond mother can bring herself to believe her son, while all else who knew him knew him to be utterly unworthy of her faith.

Felix Eldford was a scamp, his career at Cambridge a long debauch. If he possessed any feeling of honour, it hardly went beyond 'paying his shot.' Ceaseless desire for novelty of enjoyment brought constant need of money. His patrimony was an estate (on which his mother lived, guarding it carefully for him) bringing in about 1200*l.* a year. Joseph Allgrip advanced him small sums, sufficient to keep him from sinking—and, as it was afterwards hinted, to keep him in play until he became of age and took possession of his inheritance.

That miserable day at length came, and, with its dawn, down swooped upon him a score of vultures in the shapes of money-lenders, Jew and Gentile, to be paid on the instant or to 'renew' at cent per cent. The harassed profligate — having found Allgrip less extortionate than the scoundrels with whom he had had prior dealings—hastened to exhibit the state of his affairs to that prosperous man in his quiet 'private' office. 'Like a trump,' as Felix said, Joseph Allgrip at once

came down with a couple of thousand pounds, and choked off the whole flight of harpies.

Twelve hundred a year, with a house and park worth three hundred a year more, was the sum of Felix's possessions—an income very inadequate to his wants. Of all expensive sports he took ardently (as he took to everything) to horse-racing; bought horses, backed them, and won and lost by them, somehow oftener losing than winning; Allgrip, 'trump' that he was, always coming to his aid to make money-matters comfortable.

Once his losses, in conjunction with a sporting friend—who, 'by gad, sir, never was so taken in by the figur of a 'oss in the whole course of his life!'—amounted to the pretty round total of 7000*l.* As usual, he applied to Joseph Allgrip, who, for the first time, hesitated—at least, so it appeared to Felix; he looked so slowly and carefully over those 'confounded private books of his.'

Pressed to come down with the needed cash, without making a fuss about it, Allgrip intimated that he should be sorry to disoblige

his young friend, but that—as the account then stood between them—it would be absolutely necessary for his young friend to give him a mortgage on the property down at Abbot's-Nook; that simple legal arrangement effected, the money should be quite at his service; nay, if he had any pressing need for a somewhat larger sum, he had only to say so.

Felix thought it a bore to be obliged to wait while the requisite deed was being drawn; and on the morning of 'settling day' at Tattersall's—having taken advantage of Joseph's offer to the extent of a couple of extra thousands—he hurried westward, intent only on saving his credit with the raffs who were riding him to ruin.

Again, and again, and again, went Felix Eldford to the little 'private' office of Joseph Allgrip, until at length his visits were no longer welcome. Four-and-twenty thousand pounds—the sum at which the Abbot's-Nook property had been 'roughly valued'—had been advanced by Allgrip and squandered by Felix in three short years. Not a penny

more would the money-lender advance—not a penny. The bubble of the spendthrift's life was burst; and the fact of his beggary smote him as with a thunder-stroke.

Uttering an incoherent malediction he staggered out of Allgrip's office, but returned the next day—haggard-looking, yet self-sustained and with an assumed jollity of speech—and, representing that the estate was worth at least half as much again as he had had for it, begged another 2000*l.* to 'make things pleasant;' and Allgrip, in consideration of past dealings—and, as Felix said, to 'wind up the affair handsomely'—made him a present of the sum named.

Felix declared that the old money-grub was a 'trump after all,' changed his cheque into notes, enclosed them with a few lines to his mother, and then went back to his lodgings. Late next day he was discovered dead in his bedroom. He had cut his throat.

It is but justice to Joseph Allgrip to say that even a thought of the possibility of such an ending of his dealings with Felix Eldford

had never crossed his mind; and he was stunned by the news of the catastrophe.

On many accounts it was distressing to him. Well aware as he was that in all his transactions with the wretched spendthrift he had done nothing that was not sanctioned both by law and custom, he was too shrewd not to foresee that this ugly affair would be used against him by his opponents, when the period of the mayoral election arrived.

He was not wrong in his anticipation. At the inquest the whole details of his connection with the suicide-gambler were brought to light, and freely, even fiercely, commented on by the newspapers. City men, taking the word from their favourite morning paper, declared themselves 'scandalised;' and as the time for the choosing of the mayor drew near, and it was understood that Joseph Allgrip stood next in rotation for the civic honour, a cry was raised for the Corporation to 'vindicate its purity.'

Such a cry, he well knew, nothing could drown—at least, in time to serve him. As he expected, so it turned out; the mayoral elec-

tion took place, and he was passed over. The Corporation, incited and invigorated by the public clamour, had 'vindicated its purity.'

With scorn almost surmounting his great mortification, Joseph Allgrip instantly tore off his alderman's gown, resolved to leave the City to the enjoyment of its vindicated purity. A few months later he had sold the goodwill of his vast business, and realised the full value of his trade possessions, the results being that he found himself worth between 400,000*l.* and 500,000*l.* Denied the coveted civic honour, he determined to possess himself of a city, so to speak, in which he would be not merely a lord mayor, but a lord paramount.

The spot of ground which he was so pleased to appropriate and favour was the village of Abbot's-Nook, the Great House of which had been the birthplace, the home, and the inheritance of Felix Eldford, Esquire, then mouldering in his suicide's grave.

Grand were the preparations and splendid the improvements set on foot at the Hall; and excited were the popular anticipations

with regard to the advent of the rich family who were to take possession of it. Triumphal arches, a bonfire, a congratulatory address (emanating from the *quorum* of the Red Lion, strengthened for the occasion by the addition of Mr. Ghills the rector), prostrations of tenantry and peasantry—all were lavished on the gold-potent new-comers.

What more of pomp or pride could they have had in the quick-passing honours they had missed? To Mrs. Allgrip it appeared that they were actually gainers by their loss; and even Joseph felt the sting of disappointment less keenly. As for Marten, then nineteen, to be the young 'squire' of Abbot's-Nook was fifty times more pleasant to contemplate than the enjoyment of merely a year's round of Mansion-House festivities.

Through the applauding village, therefore, over flower-strewn roads, the Allgrips went to their new home. Surprise, delight, pride, filled them, as they took their first view of it. All that met their sight was rich, and fair, and pleasant to look upon.

CHAPTER III.

MAKING HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES.

It was the time of haymaking. Hay was everywhere; its sweet breath filled the whole country. On every dusty road it was lying scattered; it streaked every hedge, festooned every low-branched tree by the way-side. Everybody seemed to be haymaking; even the dogs and babies seemed to have been pressed, or to have volunteered into the service, and appeared to be enjoying it beyond measure.

In one large field at Abbot's-Nook, some dozen or fifteen persons of both sexes and of all ages were engaged in the universal employment. The hay was being carried, and Rickson, the farmer it belonged to, was plying his fork, helping to load his broad-wheeled wain with the fragrant grass. High on the

built-up pile, receiving the hay as it was pitched to him by his master and two other men, was a dissipated-looking old peasant named Jacob Summer. In little knots, scattered about the field, were men, women, and children, some turning the grass, some raking it into heaps at regular intervals, ready for the wain.

Separated from the rest, as if by chance, were two persons, a man and a woman, whom we must more particularly describe.

Of these two the man might have stood for a type of the English peasant. About five-and-twenty, he was somewhat above the middle height, with a frame lightly covered with flesh, but firm-set and indicative of great powers of physical endurance. His head was rather small, his forehead low but broad at the base; his eyes, set wide apart, blue-gray, clear, and intelligent. There was a look of firmness about his brow, and especially about his mouth, the general expression of his face being that of grave seriousness. His hair was brown, thick, and slightly curl-

ing; his complexion clear and darkly sunburnt. William Woodruff—for that was his name—was one of the best farm-labourers in the county.

His companion, Rachael Summer, was the daughter of the old man before mentioned; but it was difficult to believe that two beings so utterly unlike could stand in such close relationship. On the other hand, she might at a first glance have been mistaken for a sister of her companion, so closely did she resemble him in feature. The contrast between her and her father was indeed striking; for whereas he was ragged, self-neglected, brutal in appearance, she was dressed somewhat better than her class—with a smartness indeed almost suggestive of coquetry. She was two-and-twenty, handsome, and in the bloom of womanhood. Deprived of a mother's guidance since she was ten years of age, and reared as she had been under the roof of a depraved father, it was a matter of surprise to many that she had turned out well so far.

She was her mother's daughter, some said, adding that poor Mrs. Summer had been as good a woman as ever drew breath, before she was killed by a blow on the bosom, given her by her brute of a husband in one of his drunken fits.

At the moment of their introduction to the reader, Rachael Summer, with a rake in her hand, was working slowly along a swarth of hay, gathering it into a heap as she went, Will Woodruff, on the opposite side of the increasing heap, helping it along. A glance would have been enough to discover that they had been conversing, and with emotion. On Rachael's face there was a flush, about her lips a look of half-angry wilfulness; but it might have been noticed that, while Will turned upon her every now and then an earnest and almost beseeching gaze, she never once raised her eyes to meet his.

'No; I don't pretend to have any right to guide you,' he said in a melancholy tone. 'I ought to have had, and God knows how I wish I had; for, depend on it, Rachael, you

never stood in such need of being guided as you do now.'

She slightly tossed her head and gave a little laugh.

He looked at her for a moment before he said:

'The way you listen to me now tells me I'm right. *You* think as you're able to take care of yourself.'

'And *you* don't,' she replied pertly.

'I think just this, Rachael; I've knowed you ever since you and I was children together, and I think that at this moment I know you better, perhaps, than you do yourself. I know that you are good-hearted—of all men I have best reason to know that; but a change is coming, if it hasn't already come, over you. I don't speak only of the love that was between us, and that is broken off—neither you nor me can well tell how; perhaps because you've ceased to be yourself.'

'O,' she cried with another short laugh, 'I'm too well satisfied with myself to change into somebody else.'

Will pressed his lips close, to stifle a groan. For some moments both silently went on with their work. At length Will said:

'Rachael, I said I didn't pretend to have any right to guide you; but I think I have some sort of right. I think that standing towards you as I once did gives me a right to warn you when I see you running into danger. Call to mind, Rachael, that in all the years I've knowed you, I've never done anything as ought to make you doubt me. I loved you—I never tempted you to harm.'

A cloud instantly gathered on Rachael's brow.

'What d'ye mean by all this hinting and hinting?' she cried impatiently. 'If you know me so well as you pretend, you know that I've lived without anybody having anything to reproach me with up to this time, and that I'm not now likely to do anything to be ashamed of. You are always warning me of danger: what danger? And if there is any, haven't I got eyes for my own use? If you

are so fond and careful of me, why did you break off our courtship, as if I wasn't worth caring for?'

'Rachael!'

'You did!' she cried; 'it was you that first talked about our not caring any more for each other.'

'Remember all I said; call to mind how easily you broke the ties that held us together.'

'I do remember. I remember that you told me I was changed, as you've just now told me; that my fancy had strayed—tha my love wasn't like yours—and I don't know what more. And I told you that, if you'd growed dissatisfied with me, you was free to break off our courtship whenever you liked. Well, you chose to do it once. You see, I do remember; and it seems to me that it was you as easily broke our ties, as you call it.'

Again Will looked at her for a moment before replying, sadly and pityingly:

'Well, well, Rachael; God knows what it cost me to do what I thought was doing for

the best. Some day, I hope, you'll understand me better, and think better of me, than you do now. I'll not fret you any more with warnings or advice. Take your own way, and, if it only brings you to happiness—you may doubt it, but if it was the last word I had to say, I'd say it—nobody will be gladder than me.'

Rachael made him no answer, and the two continued their work in silence.

Suddenly a horse rapidly ridden was heard on the high road which ran for some distance along the outer side of the hedge-boundary of the hayfield. The conscious blood sprang to Rachael's cheeks. Will's brow darkened. In a few moments there was a commotion at the end of the field farthest from them, and a young man, mounted on a fine hunter, was seen attempting to clear the high closed gate. Three times he put the beast at it, but each time the horse refused the leap, the last time almost falling back upon his rider.

'Have a care, Squire; have a care!' cried Rickson; 'he don't like the gate, and maybe

knows best. There's few leaps in these parts he hasn't taken: try him at the fence.'

'We're babies, then,' cried the young man, and after walking his horse back as far as the width of the road would allow, he turned him and rode full at the hedge. Without farther hesitation the noble animal cleared it.

'That's better, old boy!' said his master, dismounting; 'I forgive you.'

The 'squire' was Marten Allgrip. He was two-and-twenty, but looked five years older. Well-formed and good-looking, like his mother, there was a sinister expression in his face not likely to be passed unnoticed, though it could hardly be definitely traced—the outward sign of a something hidden in the dark underground of his character.

After looping his horse's bridle to one of the gate-posts, and making a few remarks to Rickson on the weather and the quality of the hay-crop, he sauntered up the field towards the spot where Rachael was working, still closely attended by Will Woodruff.

'Do you know what game the young squire

is arter this evening, Jacob?' said Rickson to the old man on the wagon.

'Well,' answered the old man, with an abominable wink, 'maybe I don't—maybe I *do*.'

'Why, con-sarn it, you don't mean to say as you consent to see that young profligate hunt down your girl in that there way?' cried Rickson with honest indignation.

'O,' replied the other with a laugh, 'such as him has the right to sport anywheres; anyhow, it ain't for such as me to be strict about the preserves. But arn't it near beer-time, Master Rickson? I'm as dry as pea-straw.'

'Then curse me if you mayn't remain so!' cried the farmer, turning thoroughly disgusted from the old reprobate.

Meanwhile Marten Allgrip has accosted Rachael, and with a licence that made Will Woodruff's blood boil.

The danger against which Rachael's former lover had so lately warned her now obviously enough threatened her. Was she scared by its approach? No. The intentions of the young

libertine were scarcely disguised; and she had lived long enough in the world to have understood entirely their drift, had she chosen to reflect on her position. One thought, however, possessed her mind to the exclusion of all other thoughts—that Marten had singled her out of the whole village.

Dare we venture to say that vice was utterly alien to her heart?—that the victory was won over her vanity and not her virtue? Alas, will the day ever come when human trespass will humanely be measured by other standards than those which now govern our judgment? when we shall cry with a thoughtful and brave poet of to-day,

> 'Tis the world-rifling of the virgin soul
> That makes the body fallen and a wreck'?

Guilty or innocent, Rachael stood in the presence of her tempter, at his mercy.

Will had never before seen Marten Allgrip approach her; his worst apprehensions concerning her were now confirmed at a glance. He resolved to save her, if possible, even in

spite of herself. With this end in view, he placed himself directly between her and the young squire.

Marten instantly divined the object of the movement, and said sharply:

'If you were in my service, fellow, I'd find means to teach you better manners; as it is, take yourself to some other part of the field.'

'As I'm not your servant, squire, you should know that you've no right to order me,' answered Will.

'Right or no right, I tell you—go!' cried Marten fiercely.

'Not at your telling, squire.'

'Damn you, fellow—go! or I'll lay my whip about your head.'

'Better have a care how you venture on that kind o' play, squire,' replied Will, in a tone that would have warned Marten, if he had not been insensate with rage.

'You insolent vagabond! do you dare to threaten me?'

The young man's heavy hunting-whip flashed for a moment in the sunlight; the

next instant it was in Will's hands, raised to strike.

What saved the heir of the house of Allgrip? What were the thoughts and feelings of the lost girl, as she threw herself between her protector and her destroyer? The action preserved the life of the one, and destroyed hope in the bosom of the other.

Will's heart stood still; his flashing eyes grew dim with tears, and a groan of anguish broke from his whitened lips as he turned away. The riding-whip with its heavy boss of gold was in his hand; a thought of murder for a moment filled his brain and sent a shudder through his heart. He flung the tempting weapon far from him, and with unsteady steps went on with his work.

Avoiding the least manifestation of the anger that boiled within him, the more fiercely for the effort it cost him to conceal it, Marten turned to Rachael and continued their interrupted conversation. At length they parted, she flushed and trembling, but upheld by a strange sense of triumph; he with feelings

of satisfied vanity and vindictive pleasure feverishly commingled. Turning aside to regain his riding-whip, he passed near Will Woodruff, saying, as he did so:

'I shall make you remember this day, fellow!'

'I'm not likely to forget it,' retorted Will.

'I'll take care you don't, rascal!' cried Marten, going towards the spot where he had left his horse.

On reaching the field-gate he found Rickson preparing to send away the last load of hay to be carried that day.

'Look you, Rickson,' he cried, springing into the saddle, 'I've been insulted, and very nearly assaulted, by one of your labourers here.'

'If you had your deserts, you wouldn't have a whole bone in your skin at this moment you young scamp! And I wish you hadn't,' thought the farmer; but he said, 'Indeed, squire; I'm sorry—'

'Sorry or not, you had better not let me find that you keep that fellow Woodruff on the

farm, or I may have a word to say that will not be pleasant to you to hear, when the time comes to talk about a renewal of your lease. If you are wise, you'll not forget what I now say.'

And, without waiting for a reply, he set spurs to his horse's flanks, and was gone.

When the day's work was done, Rickson called Will into the farm-kitchen; and, after making him partake of the family supper, told him of the young squire's threat, and, with tears of mortification in his eyes, confessed that, for his children's sake, he dared not brave the resentment of the great people up at the Hall.

Will was startled by the turn events had taken; but he said what he could to allay his master's indignation, and parted with him, bearing away a small present in money and the good wishes of the whole of the farmer's family.

Deeply did Rickson drink that night, seeking to drown the galling recollection of the day; and when he went to bed it was to find,

for the first time in his life perhaps, sleep absent from his pillow.

The darkness that was upon his brow was the shadow of the Great House.

CHAPTER IV.

UP AT THE GREAT HOUSE.

Joseph Allgrip's large knowledge of business helped him rapidly to acquire the position he coveted as a landed proprietor. Acre by acre he succeeded in enlarging the boundary of his possessions, driving some excellent bargains by the way. In the course of a very few years there was hardly a rood of land in Abbot's-Nook but he was master of it. The object of his ambition was realised: he was rich, powerful, absolute.

At mention of his name the noisy gossips of the Plough kitchen became respectfully silent; the *quorum* of the Red Lion parlour mentally lifted their hats; and each vied with the other in bowing lowest as they stood by the way-side to honour his passing. For his

own part he appreciated neither the natural dignity of his position, nor the duties it as naturally imposed. He demanded homage, and heeded not whether those who paid it were made slaves or sycophants by the act.

In his wife's nostrils also pleasant and uncriticised was the incense burned in honour of her house's state. Unconstrained by nice considerations of right or delicacy, she opened up for herself a special source of respect—she sowed her charities broadcast. That she was pouring poison upon the spirit of the poor about her—poison that, however slow in action, would ultimately and inevitably quench the sustaining fire of their independence, and pauperise them body and soul—was a fine notion that never entered her mind, and would not have troubled her much if it had. Her object was to gain a certain eminence; she cared only to make sure that the steps by which she mounted offered her firm footing.

The height of his ambition attained, Joseph Allgrip sat down, if not greatly to enjoy the prospect afforded him by his elevated position,

at least undisturbed by desires of reaching yet higher ground.

The attainment of his ends, however, brought with it results not anticipated by him. The monotony of a country life very soon began to tell upon him. The business which he had to transact daily was trivial in comparison with what he had been all his life used to get through; an hour a day sufficed for its accomplishment. Taking no pleasure in books or in field-sports, time pressed heavily upon him. His mental activity gradually declined. He contracted the habit of sitting longer and longer at table; drank deeper and deeper, slept more and more frequently. At length he almost wholly left the care of his family and state to his wife, and settled into fat dulness, out of which he was now and then, for a very brief space, moved by a fit of irritability, of which, perhaps, only his doctor could have suggested the cause.

With Mrs. Allgrip—'my lady,' as she was universally called by the villagers—it was far otherwise. She was perfectly alive to the

growing incompetency of her husband, but his condition gave her no particular uneasiness; for she knew herself well able to watch over and order the affairs of her family without his aid. It may be said of her that she rose with the occasion, and made it her pride to exercise grandly her undivided authority.

As her husband sank into comparative insignificance, her son became more and more the object in which all her affections, all her ambition, centred. Thousands of pounds had been spent upon his education, or rather to support him at college; thousands more had been spent upon him during his travels; everything that money could buy for him was, at least, paid for; and if the advantages derivable from all this outlay were not very noticeable in Marten, his mother was not conscious of the fact, but took for granted that he was all she had so freely paid to have him made. He was to represent the family, and she believed that she had fitted him to represent it worthily.

Could she only have crowned all by buying him a title, she would not have thought

the half of their fortune too dear for the honour. But though that was an aspiration not attainable, she nevertheless determined to approach it as nearly as possible, by moving heaven and earth to bring about his union with the daughter of some titled house. We say she determined to move heaven and earth to the end she had in view; for, looking at the case with a thoroughly practical eye, she saw that the task she had set herself was one of infinitely greater difficulty than any she had before undertaken.

She had learned that, however potent the influence of money may be in a general way, there are some things over which it has little or no power.

The reputation of her charities, which had extended beyond the bounds of Abbot's-Nook, had brought her into personal relations with several ladies of distinction in the county, and specially with the widow and only daughter of the sometime deceased Sir Wreford Downhill, Baronet.

This Lady Downhill was a little old-middle-

aged woman, very deaf, very poor, and very proud. She had lived a cat-and-dog life with the sainted departed, who, after he had done her the honour to marry her in a hurry without a penny of dowry—she being the fifth daughter of an Irish earl with no ostensible possessions beyond his title—had had the good taste to see as little of her as was compatible with the decent conduct of his house when he was in town, and had finally relieved her of his society by getting his neck broken during the ceremony of being chaired as victor in a contested borough election—a freak of patriotism which cost him twenty thousand pounds, had the effect of reducing his affairs to hopeless insolvency, and of leaving his wife and daughter to the tender mercies of his and her relations, with all of whom she had quarrelled.

The bereaved widow and her daughter would have been destitute, in fact, but for a couple of hundred a year which came to the latter from a legacy left her by her paternal grandfather's butler, who had taken a strong liking to her when she was a child. Miss

Downhill was thus the 'comfort and support' of her mother in the widest and most practical sense; and, for her part, the widow was never tired of making known to everybody possessed, or supposed to be possessed, of eligible connections, that she had but one object on this side of the grave—namely, to see her dear Letitia well settled.

It was certainly not for want of perseverance that the realisation of this very respectable desire of Lady Downhill's life was long delayed; for those who knew her most intimately were unanimous in bearing testimony to her assiduity in searching for a good or even tolerable match for her girl. Indeed there were people coarse enough to say she was a little too ready to show off Miss Downhill's paces on the appearance of a likely bidder. But, from whatever cause, the object of Lady Downhill's maternal care and anxiety had reached the age of twenty-three without having received a single advantageous offer.

Things had arrived at that serious pass, when Mrs. Allgrip first met the mother and

daughter at a fancy-fair in aid of one of the charitable institutions of the county, and at which Miss Downhill presided at a stall, and gave no change, and charged a guinea for a tooth-brush and five shillings for a pair of hand-screens, with such smiling helplessness and aristocratic ignorance of vulgar trading principles and the relative value of money, as made her in demand under like circumstances whenever they occurred in the county; at least, so it might have been presumed, from the fact that such events never came off without her assistance.

Something more in connection with these charitable labours of Miss Downhill was admitted on all hands; it was that, for hunting up subscriptions of fancy articles, Lady Downhill carried off the palm from all competitors. Her daughter's stall was always the best appointed in the fair.

As a matter of course Lady Downhill had not failed to cast-up the sum of Marten Allgrip's eligibility. His birth, it was true, was not quite what she could have wished it to be,

nor were his manners everything she might have looked for in a son-in-law; but decidedly, on other grounds, he was unobjectionable. She reckoned that the advantages which his wealth would give her daughter were out of all comparison with any she would enjoy as a country clergyman's wife—to which fate her matrimonial future seemed solely to point at the time when she first became acquainted with Mrs. Allgrip. There were also considerations, bearing on the possibilities of her own position, that seemed to mark down the heir of the house of Allgrip as a highly fit and proper person to be secured for her daughter.

It would have simplified matters very greatly had Mrs. Allgrip been from the first informed as to these observations and reflections of Lady Downhill's; she was overjoyed, however, when at length, on the occasion of one of that lady's visits, the anxious mother confided to her, with the most flattering unreserve, her uneasiness with respect to her dear child's future, increased to a painful extent by her sense of responsibility, left alone

as she was to choose a husband for her darling out of the numerous suitors who were at that moment eagerly seeking her hand.

Mrs. Allgrip was most of all delighted to learn that, though several of the offers made to Miss Downhill were extremely attractive, there was not one that entirely satisfied the desires of her careful mother. She had great difficulty in restraining herself from expressing her delight that the chance of winning such a coveted prize in the matrimonial lottery was still open to her son; but she knew that with a lady of such refined feeling and high principles, nothing would be more likely to injure the cause in which she had so deep an interest, as to approach the subject in any but the most delicate and considerate manner. Nothing could exceed the *finesse*, therefore, with which Mrs. Allgrip prepared the way to open up the question of her son's alliance with the honourable house of Downhill.

With all her shrewdness and tact, however, she did not keep her secret half so long from Lady Downhill as she imagined and intended.

On her side, Lady Downhill, being in no doubt as to the success of her game, played her cards with the utmost care and effectiveness. She never permitted Mrs. Allgrip to have the slightest notion that she was quite well aware of nearly all that was passing in her mind; and when at last the hour arrived for that equally astute and ambitious mother to open her mind, Lady Downhill exhibited such natural surprise and so much maternal emotion that, had Mrs. Allgrip been the least vain of schemers, she must have felt a glow of pride and satisfaction in achieving such a successful piece of domestic diplomacy.

There seemed, indeed, only one thing wanting to insure the perfect well-working of Mrs. Allgrip's match-making machinery—the acquiescence of Marten himself in the arrangements made for him by his doting mother. With her husband she found it easy to deal. The man of business saw that, in the partnership proposed, all the money was to come from the one side, and it did not appear to him the advantages, in the shape of 'family connec-

tions,' offered by the other side, were by any means a full equivalent; but he well knew his wife's general shrewdness in making a bargain, and therefore did not withhold his consent to the arrangement proposed.

The difficulty was with Marten. That full-grown result of a spoilt childhood, though not wanting in affection for his mother, had been so used to have his way in most things, somehow or other, and especially where only her wishes or powers were concerned, that she could not but have some doubts as to how he would act.

He had often seen Miss Downhill, and there could be no doubt that she had never made such an impression on him as might be expected to ripen into anything like warmth of attachment. He did not object to her; she was not bad-looking, she talked very well: that was about all he would have said concerning her, had his opinion of her been asked. For Lady Downhill, however, he had a very decided repugnance, which had on more than one occasion expressed itself in language much

more forcible than chaste: 'cadger' was certainly not the severest epithet he had been known to apply to the philanthropic mother of Miss Downhill. To know that that lady was at the Hall was always enough to make him keep away from home, or at all events to make him take care not to go into her presence.

Painfully alive to the dangerous impediment which this aversion of her son's might be in the way of her plan, Mrs. Allgrip had several times ventured to expostulate with him on the very marked manner in which he showed his dislike—a dislike which, she was sure, he would get over, if he would only allow himself to become better acquainted with the high-bred and otherwise estimable object of it. Marten had merely answered:

'O, hang her and her high breeding!' Or, 'Confound the old cadger! what does she want here so often? Something for another fancy-fair swindle? Well, give her a dozen bottles of pickles, or a litter of pigs!'

Driven almost to despair by the stress of

this impracticable spirit of her son's, Mrs. Allgrip had resolved on making a desperate effort to get the two young people together by stratagem, in the hope that at least the ice might be broken between them.

The day chosen for the execution of this very doubtful experiment was the one on which the events related in the previous chapter had taken place. The plan was simple enough. It was arranged by the two mothers that Lady Downhill and her daughter should call at the Hall in the most casual way, that they should stay to tea, and that the two young people should be left alone, as if by chance; Miss Downhill having been previously instructed by her mother as to the uses to which she was bound in duty to put her interview with the heir of the house of Allgrip.

Lady Downhill and her daughter arrived at the Hall some time before Marten returned from his ride, and so there was no need, or rather opportunity, for them to explain that the object of their visit was to inquire the

exact price per pair of the blankets dispensed by Mrs. Allgrip to 'her poor' during the past winter. Tea was nearly over, in fact, before Marten joined the party; and when he did so his mother's anxiety was not lessened by a certain air of feverish preoccupation which she noticed in his manner. She did her best, however, to appear unconscious of the fact that anything was the matter; but the task would have over-taxed many a lady with double her amount of resources. The conversation would not sustain itself; it waked up spasmodically for a few seconds at a time, only to fall again into a silence becoming more and more uncomfortable.

As for Joseph Allgrip, he could do nothing to help his wife. He was in one of his irritable moods, and the necessity for talking loudly and often repeating in the deaf ears of Lady Downhill, who was particularly hard of hearing on this eventful evening, only helped to make things more difficult. Mrs. Allgrip, however, was not the woman to slide quietly into hopelessness. She was a woman of action,

and now, therefore, resolved to do something before it was too late.

Marten paid little or no attention to Miss Downhill, by whose side he had taken his seat, of course without the least idea that the party had been disposed at table with a special view to his doing so. His mother watched him closely, but could make nothing out of her observations. She was completely puzzled, indeed; for his manner was unlike anything she had ever before remarked.

The pauses in the conversation having at length become painfully embarrassing, she—somewhat abruptly, and after one or two mental false starts—rushed to the fore with:

'O, by the way, Lady Downhill, I should be so glad if you would kindly give me your opinion as to some patterns of flannel—patterns of flannel—which have been sent me from London for my poor.'

Lady Downhill, who saw at a glance the intention of Mrs. Allgrip, replied graciously:

'I'm sure, if my indifferent judgment can assist you in the cause of charity, you may at

all times command it. But, really, I fear you spoil your poor; your red cloaks last year were too good—much too good, I assure you.'

Marten moved in his chair impatiently, and his mother dreaded lest he should get up and leave the room. She therefore said hastily,

'Well, well, my dear Lady Downhill, you shall not have cause to scold me about my flannel, for you yourself shall choose it; you —yourself—shall—choose it. Will you come to my sitting-room? for the young people cannot be expected to take much interest in such matters. Allgrip, my dear, give your arm to Lady Downhill. You, my love,' she said nervously to Marten, 'will entertain Miss Downhill for a few minutes.'

And, as if she feared some open objection from her son's lips, she hurried with her husband and Lady Downhill from the room.

Her son's manner would have puzzled her more and more, if she had seen him after being left alone with Miss Downhill. He seemed suddenly to throw off the load of preoccupation which she had noticed, and took

upon himself the duties of entertainer with a *verve* that was almost startling to the young lady herself. The more he talked, the more she was surprised at the change of his bearing towards her; for whereas, in the few conversations that had hitherto passed between them, it had been herself who had always been obliged to lead and carry on the conversation, often in the face of a too apparent indifference on his part, this evening he led the talk and carried it on with a freedom from restraint wholly unaccountable to her. His looks, too, were very different from any she had ever before seen him exhibit; there was a something in his eyes that gave her an indefinable sense of discomfort.

The few minutes' entertainment spoken of by Mrs. Allgrip had been protracted to the extent of upwards of an hour, when the warning note of a clock that stood on a console in the room made Marten start and take out his watch. He rose almost involuntarily from his seat, and the conversation came to an abrupt close.

It was obvious that he only wanted a pretext for doing so to leave the room at once. Miss Downhill felt that she was blushing under the sense of mortification which any woman would feel under such circumstances; and, much as she wished her presence had been a sufficient attraction to retain him, she would have been glad if he had left her, even without the civilities or excuses of leave-taking.

Some half-sense of the impropriety of quitting the presence of a lady so abruptly as he was tempted to do forced itself upon his mind, however, and he lingered absently, waiting for an opportunity to make his exit without being positively rude. It was certainly the first time that his courtesy had ever been permitted to over-rule either convenience or pleasure with respect to Miss Downhill.

The position was embarrassing to both, and his patience was rapidly passing away, when Miss Downhill made a faint attempt to renew the broken conversation, as the readiest means of extrication.

'What a beautiful horse you were riding this evening!' she said timidly. 'Both mamma and myself greatly admired it, as we saw you ride through the village.'

The words were scarcely spoken when the clock on the console began to strike the hour of eight, and Marten made a significant movement.

'Yes, yes,' he answered; 'he's well enough to look at; but if he ever serves me such another trick as he did this evening, I shall be obliged to shoot him—or,' he added with a short laugh, 'sell him to one of my friends.'

Miss Downhill laughed politely; but there was something in the spirit of Marten's jest, and something more in the tone in which he uttered it, that made the sense of her position in life weigh with a sudden heaviness upon her soul; the idea of putting her whole future into the keeping of such a man fell like an iron weight upon her heart.

Marten, of course, had not the least notion of what was passing in her mind, and inwardly thanked her for giving him a pretext

for getting away from her. The pretext was poor and clumsy enough, but he had no scruple in taking advantage of it; it was a 'By the way, if you'll excuse me, I'll give some directions about him'—the horse. The lady had only to return a 'Pray don't mention it,' and Marten hastily quitted her presence, not to give directions about his horse, need it be said?

Left quite alone for some ten minutes, in that short space of time Miss Downhill endured, perhaps, more suffering of spirit than she had had to bear in all the rest of her life put together. A fierce struggle between the unsophisticated woman in her breast and the influences that were pushing her on to barter it away for the thing called 'social position' was waged there, and ended in tears and something very like despair.

When she was rejoined by her mother and Mrs. Allgrip, the tears were wiped from her eyes, and it required the keen glances of the mothers to discover that the meeting of the young people had produced no good

results, or rather, none of the results desired. Marten was gone, and the fact of his absence told the story of failure almost without Miss Downhill's answers to the questions put to her.

Lady Downhill had not a little difficulty to restrain herself from roundly expressing her indignation at Marten's conduct, and her parting with Mrs. Allgrip was anything but cordial. Once out of the Hall, she gave free vent to her vexation, much of her wrath being aimed point-blank at her unfortunate daughter for the unskilful way in which one of the best hands that could possibly have been dealt to her had been played. After her own mother, too, had taken such pains in shuffling and packing the cards!

CHAPTER V.

THE DUSK OF EVENING.

With the best of us, to live under the shadow of a well-founded sense of injury is a severe trial of patience; and when the injury is very great, we achieve no small moral triumph in dealing with it worthily. Few of us pass through the ordeal nobly. Acting on minds untempered by culture, the sense of injury is too apt to ferment and labour with a terrible fecundating power; wrong breeds wrong; a false deduction at the outset, and the sum of a life is falsified to the end.

Over Will Woodruff impended all the hazards of such a trial. Left to himself, wild thoughts of revenge sprang up quickly in his mind, like a band of bravoes lurking in readiness for any murderous work. Such thoughts were as new to him as the terrible provoca-

tion that had evoked them; they made him shudder at himself, and the struggle was long and horrible before he felt himself safe from the devilish influence that was impelling him to the commission of a sanguinary crime.

Upon leaving Rickson's house, he had walked slowly towards the Plough, intending to seek there, not the diversion of company or drink, but Rachael's father, in whom he was determined, if it was possible, to arouse a feeling of parental responsibility. But the perturbation of his mind increased at every step, and every moment he felt less able to direct his own conduct, much less that of the brutalised old man, to whose abominable want of fatherly care he too clearly traced the trouble with which he was at that very moment burdened. Abandoning his intention, therefore, he turned his steps towards the solitude of a wide stretch of common-land that lay on the outskirt of the village. His only thought in going there was that it was the least likely place for him to meet anybody at night, and he desired to be alone.

The storm in his mind raged savagely, and it was long before he felt that he was master of himself. Seating himself upon the edge of a sand-pit, he thought and thought over his position, and, though his hatred of Marten became more and more determined, the idea of taking vengeance for the wrong already done, or for the more wicked trespass which he was convinced the young squire meditated towards Rachael, slowly passed away.

Something like pride in the sense of his own injury grew in his mind; the advantage which Marten had taken of his power had been so paltry, that the peasant, while suffering under the lash of the great man's resentment, felt himself the great man's moral superior. Rachael's fate, he saw, must be in her own keeping, since she denied him the right to shield her from the danger hanging over her; and he saw that, according to ordinary notions of justice, he had not the right even to avenge her, however she might be wronged.

Across the common, by the side of the spot at which he was seated, ran a footpath,

in the direction of the park-paling of the Hall, over which it was continued by means of a few wooden steps on either side. Restless, and disinclined to go to his home, Will followed this path until it crossed a rustic bridge, spanning a small beck, or brook, by the boundary of the park.

The yellow moon was behind the tall beeches that spread their fan-like arms over the lichened park-paling, her light giving a mellow bloom to the upper edges of the trees against the cool sky. All was quiet, except the intermittent cry of an owl in some distant wood.

Pausing on the little bridge, and resting his elbows on the rough wooden rail that gave a hand-rest on one side only, Will stood watching the faint twinkle of the stars in the rippling water. He had no fine thoughts about the grand peacefulness of the starlit heavens above him, nor any idea of the soothing influence which the tranquillity around him was mysteriously exercising upon his soul; he was, in fact, in that dull state of

semi-unconsciousness that commonly follows great mental disturbance in uncultured minds.

The minutes passed unheeded; the moon rose higher into the clear sky, making the shadows of the beech-trees sharper and deeper toned; the owl had ceased to cry, or had flown beyond ear-shot; and still he stood upon the bridge, looking down into the never-resting water of the brook, unseeing and unthinking.

Suddenly he started into listening consciousness. In a moment his face became livid, and, as he glared into the shadow in which the path towards the park lost itself, his hand closed upon a knife in his pocket.

There were voices near, and coming nearer!

With savage instinct he moved quickly and silently into the shelter of a clump of broom, and listened—listened with all his might to hear through the bell-like beating of his heart.

Will's wildly awakened senses had not deceived him. From the shadow of the park on to the bridge came slowly Marten and Rachael. But few words passed between

them, and those were of leave-taking, spoken in a low tone, and mingled with light laughter.

The speakers parted. Marten went back by the wooden steps into his father's park, while Rachael, with a quick step and lightly-beating heart, took the way towards the village.

At the distance of a few paces from the rustic bridge, the moonlight cleared the tops of the park trees, and spread over the common a soft carpeting of light. Rachael had taken one step across the magic boundary of shadow when, with a cry of terror, she sprang aside from the footpath.

Will stood before her in the moonlight.

'Will!' she exclaimed.

'Ay!' he answered hoarsely.

'Will, what are you doing here?' she cried, scarcely knowing what she said.

'Doing? This path's free to me, to you, and to everybody—to squire and farm-labourer alike,' he said doggedly.

'Let me go home, then.'

'Who stays you?' cried Will darkly. 'But,

look you, if I was to lay you dead at my feet, instead of letting you go, free to tread this path again as you have trodden it to-night, it might be the greatest kindness I could do towards you.'

'O Will, Will, what do you mean?' she cried, growing wild with terror, and impelled to shriek for help, but at the same time restrained by a fear of precipitating the danger she dreaded.

'Go your ways, go your ways; you'll not die by my hands.'

'Why do you speak to me, Will, in this terrible manner? What have I done that you should threaten my life?' she said through her tears, which now began to flow.

'Threaten your life?' he replied, with a grim relaxation of the mouth. 'What word of mine ever was a threat against your life? I said that if I was to kill you it might be doing you a service; but you have no longer any right to look for services at my hands.'

Her tears flowed freely for a moment or two, and then she said:

'Forgive me, Will, if I have acted wrongly towards you; we are both passionate, and—'

'And one of us is foolish, vain, and vicious,' he cried, interrupting her.

'You have no right to say that of me, Will.'

'I have! It's the one only right I have over you!'

'It's false—false!' she cried vehemently, as her courage returned.

'You dare to say that to me?—to me, who know your secret?' exclaimed Will indignantly.

'To you or any one! And, as for secrets, it's false again! You know no secrets of mine!'

'I know your thoughts as well as you know them yourself, and you know that you are lying! But remember what I now say to you: we'll each keep to ourselves what we know, and see who keeps it longest and closest. Good-night.'

And without waiting for a reply, Will walked away in the direction of the village,

but by another path from that by which Rachael passed to her home.

In spite of all her loud denial, the vain deluded woman knew that Will had spoken no more than the truth, when he had said that she had a secret to keep that was no secret to him; and this knowledge filled her mind with fear, mixed with a feeling that was nearly akin to hatred. No such idea as that Will might deserve somewhat of gentle consideration on her part came to shame away the spurious indignation behind which she retreated.

And, indeed, what could she do but be angry or self-condemned? This bastard anger, built upon an undefined or undefinable sense of injury, is the last vantage-ground of self-accusing wrong; poor Rachael rushed to it with the blind instinct of self-defence, and it crumbled beneath her tread almost before she had set foot upon its ramparts.

CHAPTER VI.

DOWN AT THE PLOUGH.

After parting with Rachael on the common, Will went towards the Plough, hoping, from the lateness of the hour, to find that noisy place of entertainment tolerably free from guests. He was calm but gloomy, and disinclined to brave the lonely sense of self which he knew would weigh upon him in his sleepless bed. Sleep, he thought, would come sooner under the influence of a pipe and a glass or two.

As he came near the house, the sound of many voices rose loudly from behind the ruddy window-curtains of the kitchen, or common room. The Plough company was sitting unusually late, and he was passing on without entering the house when the voice of

Jacob Summer, raised in angry altercation, attracted him, and he went in.

The large room, with its raftered ceiling and wide hearth, was filled with tobacco-smoke and noise. There were eighteen or twenty men present, and of these at least half-a-dozen were drunk, including master Zachary Spillet, the landlord; and the rest were all more or less the worse for strong drinks, in which the labouring part of the population of Abbot's-Nook indulged with little or no stint; for at that time—that is to say, some five-and-forty years ago—fine spirits of foreign distillation were mysteriously abundant and remarkably cheap in that highly-favoured village.

On this particular evening, much good liquor had had the effect of spoiling much good company, and of making the *habitués* of the Plough kitchen extraordinarily inharmonious. Topic after topic had led them into wrangling, in which they lost themselves amid a maze of wild asseverations, blind denials, oaths, and savage contradictions.

Jacob Summer, who had been one of the first to show signs of drunkenness, was the discordant spirit of the company. In his cups he was shamelessly insolent and insulting, and several times during the evening he had made remarks that had well-nigh called down chastisement on his head. The blow had been averted, and peace—that was only not war—had been patched up for a few minutes, during which there was either partial silence or some one volunteered to sing, and accordingly trolled forth an interminable ditty, in the middle of which he was 'put out,' or had to 'try back,' or was altogether put down by the rekindling conversation. Perhaps the only song that was ever listened to from end to end in the Plough kitchen was 'Will Watch, the bold smuggler,' the line, 'We'll fight while we can; when we can't, boys, we'll run,' never failing to awaken a thundering chorus. But even the daring sentiments of that heroic contrabandist had no prevailing influence on this even-

ing, which was given up to hard drinking and anti-conviviality.

A great deal of the bitterness which had mingled with the draughts of the Plough gossips, had arisen out of the exasperating subject of the threshing-machine, which the peasant for a long time regarded as his most deadly enemy. The more nearly drunk the speakers were, the more nearly they saw ruin and destruction advancing upon them; and it was at these men that Jacob Summer flung his most galling insolences.

'You'll see!' he cried with a chuckle. 'It'll make short work o' all such as you! And what o' it?—there's none o' you worth your salt!'

'There's a many o' us as is a darned deal better men nor ever you was, nor ever you will be, Jacob Summer!' replied the man at whom the preceding remark had been more particularly levelled.

'Men!' cried Summer, spitting on the floor in sign of contempt; 'you've no call to talk about men; there's been none in your family

since your grandfather was hung for horse-stealing!'

'I' you say that agen, Summer, I'll split your head open 'ith this stool!' cried the man, springing up and brandishing the stool he had been sitting on.

There was a general uprising and rushing forward to prevent the outraged man from carrying his threat into execution. It was at that moment that Will Woodruff entered the kitchen.

'Let him come on!' cried Summer, starting to his feet; 'I've drowned in the beck, in my time, scores o' whelps better worth living than he is!'

'Stand out o' my way!' shrieked the other; 'I'll ha' no more on't! The old vagabond; but let him look to's own belongings! I don't stand by an' see my da'ter going to shame in the broad daylight! Stand away, an' let me get at him!'

'Come away, Summer — come away!' cried Will, pressing forward and seizing the old man by the arm.

'You leave hold o' me, Will, or I'll knock your brains out!' yelled Summer, suddenly exalted into a frenzy of rage, and flinging himself towards his antagonist with savage ferocity. But in the very act of doing so, his foot struck against the leg of a bench, and he fell, striking the side of his head with terrific force against a rough log of firewood which lay beside the hearth.

He never moved hand or foot after he fell.

Hardly any of the company were too drunk to see that something serious had happened, and the suddenness and gravity of the event had the effect of sobering a good many of them.

Of course everybody pressed about the prostrate old man, and there was a clamour of suggestions as to what was best to be done for him.

'Lift him up,' cried one.

'No, no; let him lie on's back,' cried another.

'Pull of's neckercher.'

'Throw some cold water on's face.'

'Take him out into the air.'

'Ay, take him out into the air,' echoed the landlord, scarcely able to speak distinctly, and only having a vague idea that by getting Jacob Summer out of his house he was getting rid of all responsibility regarding the poor wretch.

Will closely examined the puffed face, which was rapidly becoming discoloured, and from the closed eyes of which some drops of blood were starting. A sickening presentiment that he was looking upon a dead man rose in his mind. Bidding the others carry the old man to his home, he hastened away to fetch the doctor.

Mr. Squills was in his accustomed place, as one of the respectable *quorum* of the Red Lion, and when his short-sleeved and red-handed assistant informed him that he was wanted immediately, he unhesitatingly proceeded to say a number of harsh things against a certain unoffending prospective mother of the pauper class, and declared himself more than half resolved there and then to throw up the

parish practice altogether. Instead of going to such a desperate length, however, he only took an angry sip at his hot brandy-and-water and set the glass down with a jerk that flirted the liquor over on to Red Lion's mahogany.

'Confound these women,' he cried, addressing the sympathy that was sitting ready, with comfortable pipe and glass before it; 'confound these paupers! they take a pleasure in giving the doctor three times as much trouble as the richest ladies in the county!'

'Disgusting!'

'If things were not put upon a better footing, the consequences would be serious some of these days!'

In this enlightened spirit the *quorum* of the Red Lion fulfilled its high mission on this particular occasion.

'I' you please, sir, it isn't a labour, but a——'

Mr. Squills's assistant was about to say 'labourer;' but fortunately remembering the claims of professional dignity, gulped down the despicable word-jingle, and said:

'Surgical case, sir; accident to old Jacob Summer; intoxicated; fell in kitchen of Plough; severe injury to skull.'

The landlord of the Red Lion moved comfortably on his seat, closed his eyes, puffed out with slow enjoyment a long train of tobacco-smoke, leaving to others the task of expressing the obviously proper remarks to be made upon the disgraceful occurrence just reported.

He could not have left the duty in abler or readier hands than those of the *quorum*, who had not the least hesitation in declaring the Plough to be a scandal and a pest to the village of Abbot's-Nook.

Having waited to record his opinion to the above effect, Mr. Squills finished his brandy-and-water, quitted the cheerful society of the Red Lion, and went with Will to the cottage of Jacob Summer.

The wretched old man had been brought home upon a wheelbarrow and laid upon his bed. The room was feebly lighted by one thin guttering tallow candle, and a crowd of

neighbours were about the bed. Rachael, surrounded by women, was crying upon a chair in a corner of the room. Of course all made way for the doctor. Will stayed by the door, waiting to hear the verdict.

The case was one with which Mr. Squills found no difficulty in dealing. Jacob Summer was dead. It was doubtful whether any surgical aid could have saved him, even if it had been applied immediately after the occurrence of the accident; but the rough carriage in the wheelbarrow had decidedly finished the work of death.

Rachael was led out of the house by the women, so that she might not be left alone with the body. As she went out of the door, Will moved aside to let her pass. She saw him, and cried to him with a wild accent of grief:

'O, Will! O, Will!'

They led her into a neighbour's house, and Will made her no answer; but her words rang in his heart for many a long and eventful year after that memorable night.

Jacob Summer lay upon his last bed; horror there was about it, but surely little of sanctity. Worthless in life, he lay there—a heap of human refuse waiting to be cast into Death's waste-pit. Nothing more?

'Dust to dust.'

CHAPTER VII.

JOSEPH ALLGRIP'S ACCOUNT CLOSED.

A STRANGER passing through the village of Abbot's-Nook that night must have been very unobservant if he failed to notice that some disquieting influence was at work there; the sight of knots of men and women at their cottage doors and at the corners of the off-turning roads would have indicated to him that something unusual had occurred.

If he had gone to the parlour of the Red Lion, even at a little past midnight, he would have heard not only all about the circumstances of the wretched old man's death, but much edifying comment upon the vices of the class to which the old sinner belonged.

He would have found that Mr. Sifter, the lawyer, was great upon the political economy of agricultural labour; and that Mr. Squills—

who had resumed his place in the *quorum*—was greater, or at all events more fluent, upon the moral and sanitary influence of alcoholic drinks, with reference to populations, labouring, manufacturing and bucolic.

Mr. Gattens—not usually oratorical—would have favoured him with his views on the subject of the excise laws, from which he would have gathered that the speaker held the government of his country responsible for nearly every ill that flesh was heir to at that particular time; since he affirmed, without fear of contradiction, it was in the power of that government to remove the fecund source of poverty, disease, and crime from the working people of this kingdom, by the simple process of putting a prohibitory duty upon all spirits, whether of home or foreign distillation. That was all that the then government had to do, to save him, Mr. Gattens, and the gentlemen present from such scenes—such scandalous exhibitions, he might say—as had that night disgraced the village of Abbot's-Nook, and attracted the attention even of strangers

to the low moral condition of one section of its inhabitants.

No stranger entered the parlour of the Red Lion that night, however; and the convives, soon after midnight, feeling that they had socially, intellectually, and politico-economically done their duty, parted company and went to their homes. They were the latest movers in the High-street, and the last voice heard there was that of Mr. Gattens, who, in parting with the lawyer at his own door-step, said with a slightly erratic emphasis:

'Take my—word for it, Sifter—a pro-hibtory duty is—th' only thing.'

Having delivered himself of this concluding, if not conclusive, piece of reasoning, Mr. Gattens went home to Mrs. Gattens, and finding that lady awake and not disinclined for talk, expressed himself on one source of the public income—the Customs—in terms that, had they reached Mr. Sifter's ears, would have made his eyes, and perhaps his mouth, open very wide indeed.

Jabob Summer's cottage, with its sole

ghastly tenant, was dark and silent as the grave. Rachael had been led into another cottage, a few paces off, and this too was dark and still, but not wholly silent; for through the early hours of the night the sound of low and half-checked sobs pierced the thin walls and reached a listening ear. The low sobs were Rachael's; the listening ear was Will Woodruff's.

No; it was not that Rachael so loved her father that the loss of him was an anguish to her. No; it was not that Will's down-trodden love had sprung up again, strong and trusting, that he watched and suffered near her in her misery. No; though

> 'Love is a hardy flower,
> That anywhere will blow,
> In sunshine, or in shower,
> In happiness or woe,'

it was stricken dead in Will's bosom, whatever other feelings might still be living there.

At length the sobs ceased, and Will went to his bed, thinking that Rachael had cried herself to sleep; but he was scarcely out of

sight of the cottage, when with noiseless steps she stole to the place where her father lay. She carried the door-key in her hand, and entered unhesitatingly.

After a few minutes she came forth, bringing with her a small bundle, and she had put on her cloak and bonnet. Closing the door gently behind her, and leaving the key in the lock, she resolutely walked away in the direction opposite both to the Hall and to Will's cottage; never once looking back, but taking her way straight towards the sea-coast, and leaving no trace of her flight.

The news of Jacob Summer's death did not reach the Hall that night; but death itself was there before the night was over.

When Marten returned home, after the departure of Lady Downhill and her daughter, he found both his mother and father in extreme ill-humour. At first he was not inclined to trouble himself on this account, or in fact to think that it was any concern of his; and it was some time before his mother summoned up resolution enough to say to him:

'My dear Marten, your father and myself are both very angry with you for your treatment of Miss Downhill this evening, which was rude and ungentlemanly.'

He was, for a moment, surprised by this address; but as the subject of his treatment of Lady Downhill and her daughter had frequently been discussed between himself and his mother—when it had always been cast aside or overridden by himself—he was immediately ready to deal with it in the fashion which had hitherto been perfectly successful.

'Don't talk nonsense about these confounded Downhills, mother,' he said. 'If they don't like my manners, let them keep out of my way; then we shall neither of us have anything to object to.'

Joseph Allgrip moved impatiently in his big easy-chair; but Marten took no notice of the action.

'But,' said his mother, 'that is not the question. Whether you like Lady Downhill or not, you have no right to treat Miss Down-

hill with indignity. Your own self-respect, if nothing else, demands that you should behave towards her with courtesy while she is a visitor in your father's house.'

'Well, well,' cried Marten in a tone of irritability, 'if I've hurt her feelings, I'm sorry for it. But she must be well used to that sort of thing by this time, I should think; so don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill.'

In speaking thus to his mother, Marten forgot that he was also speaking to a woman. Cruel as women to often are to one another in the battle of life, a woman, when her instincts are free from the pressure of self-interest is a woman's readiest champion under wrong. Mrs. Allgrip's blood was stirred by her son's coarseness, not to say, brutality. A new and stronger regard for Miss Downhill was awakened in her bosom; and Marten soon discovered that on this subject his mother could no longer be dealt with in the old manner.

'You have greatly shocked me,' she said; 'you make me fear that I may have made

some dreadful mistake in the way I have reared you. If by my too great indulgence of you I have made you selfish to heartlessness, God forgive me!'

'O! confound it, mother,' cried Marten, 'don't let's have a row about nothing. I'll be politeness itself next time the Downhills are here; will that content you?'

'No,' she replied, slightly raising her voice, while her forehead reddened with an indignant flush; 'no; it will not content me to see my son merely acting politeness and hypocritically affecting manly feelings. It will not comfort me to know that he can be a hypocrite as well as a brute.'

'Come, come, mother, I've had enough of this,' cried Marten angrily. 'I've not done any thing to deserve this sort of abuse, and I won't stand it.'

'You won't what?' demanded Joseph Allgrip, suddenly breaking silence and feverishly clutching the arms of his chair as he spoke, 'You won't what?'

'I — won't stand it,' answered Marten

doggedly and without looking towards his father.

'Leave him to me, Joseph,' said Mrs. Allgrip. 'I fear we have brought this upon ourselves.'

'Hark you, sir!' cried Joseph, without heeding his wife; 'the day when my son forgets his duty and the respect he owes to the authority of his mother and father, this house ceases to be his home.—Be silent, Betsy. I have not been blind to our son's growing insolence, though I have held my tongue. More than once the thought has risen in my mind that he has had life opened out to him too easily; but if I have made a mistake in that respect, I can remedy it. Suppose I say, I do not choose that the fortune I have laboured to amass shall pass into idle and ungrateful hands?'

Joseph Allgrip paused, and watched the effect produced in his son by this ugly supposition. From being very red, he became deadly pale; but this change was unremarked by Marten, who, partly from anger, partly

from fear, did not venture to look his father in the face. Mrs. Allgrip, however, noticed, with an indefinite sense of alarm, the alteration in her husband's looks. She endeavoured to prevent him from saying any more; but he silenced her with an angry gesture.

'What if it were my will and pleasure,' he went on, addressing Marten, 'that you should go out into the world and make your own fortune, before I suffer you to inherit mine? Why should not you serve an apprenticeship to life as well as your father? Now, pay good heed to what I am going to say to you. Your mother has, for some time past, had views of her own as to the best way of settling you in life. Neither she nor I ever thought of putting any restraint upon your reasonable inclinations; but it is her wish, and it is mine, that you may find in Miss Downhill a lady whom you may be proud to make your wife.'

Marten started at this revelation—for so it was to him; but he did not venture to interrupt his father's address.

'This young lady—who is your superior in every way, except as to prospects,' the old man went on, 'you have systematically treated with rudeness,—for no reason, but that you have not yet learned to conduct yourself in a manner at all worthy of the position which you have taken it too much for granted you are born to fill. I warn you that you have a good deal yet to learn; and not the least important thing for you to understand is, that your father will not permit you with impunity to act in defiance of his wishes and his just authority. I have won my fortune in my own way, and in my own way I shall dispose of it. If my son is bent on shaping his own life in opposition to my views, he shall do it at his peril! Leave the room! the sight of you irritates me, and may provoke me into saying more than I intend—or into making some resolve I had rather not now make. Go. When it is convenient to me, I may have something more to say to you on this subject; meantime don't let what I have now said pass out of your mind, or you may bitterly repent.'

He waved his hand petulantly, and Marten, without bidding either mother or father 'good-night,' went to his own room, chafing and rebellious, and impressed only with the idea that his father was a blustering old fool.

Left alone together, Mr. and Mrs. Allgrip sat for some time in silence, Joseph tapping the arms of his chair impatiently, Mrs. Allgrip revolving in her mind all that had been said by her husband, preparatory to saying whatever she could think of in her son's behalf, in mitigation of his father's rigour.

But the excitements of the evening had wrought an extraordinary change in Joseph Allgrip. For many years he had been used to take his wife's word for law. Not that she ruled him in any vulgar sense, but that he, for the most part, agreed with her views; and when he happened to differ from her, he was generally too indolent to oppose her. On this eventful evening, however, she had scarcely spoken three words in Marten's defence before he stopped her sharply with:

'Silence! I'll put an end to all this! Un-

til to-night it was immaterial to me whom the fellow married, so long as it was a respectable woman; but I am now determined that he shall marry Miss Downhill, or, by George! out of my house he goes! And let him take care he does not drive me to disinherit him. Such things can be done, *are* done every day. The devil has got into him, and must be driven out, if he's to come to any good; if he isn't, let the devil take his own, but it shall not be with my hard-earned fortune in his pocket. No, no, no, I'll be cursed if it shall!'

He rose from his chair, and without seeming to be aware of what he was doing, went to his bedroom, muttering:

'No, no, no, I'll be cursed if it shall!'

Mrs. Allgrip followed him in surprise mixed with vague terror. He did not speak to her either before or after they were in bed; and she feared to question him, lest by anything she said she might renew his irritability.

The hours wore away. Joseph Allgrip slept, and at length his wife fell asleep too. But she was early awake, and her first thought

was of the events of the past night. The light of the summer morning fell freshly upon the face beside her own — a pale face and very still; so still that only the stillness of death was like it.

Joseph Allgrip was dead; and his wife's shrieks, ringing through the Great House, told the horrors of his end.

Mr. Squills, roused from his slumbers, hurried into a handsome chariot with the Allgrip crest upon every panel, and driven at full gallop up to the Hall, had only to announce with a professional gravity worthy of the occasion that Joseph Allgrip had died of apoplexy, and that his spark of life had been extinct for several hours.

CHAPTER VIII.

ABBOT'S-NOOK IN MOURNING.

There was much excitement in the village when the news of what had happened at the Hall became known, as it did very early in the day, through the circumstantial report of Mr. Squills. There was much talk concerning the event; but it is doubtful whether a single word of real sympathy or regret was spoken in Abbot's-Nook that day. 'Will the family cease to live at the Hall?' was the question most often asked, apparently conveying the leading idea evoked by the intelligence of the Squire's death. Mrs. Allgrip was generally looked upon as a woman to whom the loss of her husband would make little or no difference: a view which was possibly not the most erroneous that could have been taken of her character with reference to her position.

The probable value of Marten's inheritance was largely discussed, and an opinion freely expressed that, when he got the reins into his hands, he would, for a time, at all events, 'go the pace.'

The subject of Rachael's flight was debated with infinitely more of genuine feeling and interest. Many plausible motives for her disappearance were suggested, but not one of these closely approached the truth.

It could hardly have been otherwise, when, even in Rachael's own mind, those motives were by no means clearly determined. The rude shocks to which her feelings had been subjected, first through her meeting with Will Woodruff on the common, and next through the sudden and terrible circumstances of her father's death, had affected her as, perhaps, hardly any other experiences could have impressed her.

Tamed and held down by the frightful reality of these events, all the other circumstances of her life took the complexion of unrealities as they rose up in her mind, which

they did with an irresistible pertinacity of importunity. In the silence of night and in the near presence of the dead, she had for the first time thought of herself and of the life that was before her.

With thought came bitter tears, that fell the faster the more she thought; and still she could not choose but think on, though at every moment the past became more strange and dream-like, the present more terrible to face. And the future? It presented itself as a road whereon she might have travelled, hopeful of finding upon it some bright spots to gladden and refresh her by the way; but along which she could now only pass in doubt and terror, dreading a pitfall at every step.

Little did Will think, as he listened to her sobs, how much of the bitterness of her tears came from the thought that, in the wrecking of her own peace, she had cruelly destroyed his; or that, as she uttered the last low cry that reached his ears, she had resolved to fly from the village, so that he might never again be troubled by the sight of her. Least of all

did he think that, in turning her thoughts towards him, she drove another image from her mind, as if its retention had been a crime, a sacrilege.

Will was amazed when he heard of her flight. The catastrophe at the Hall forbade the idea of her having gone away on Marten Allgrip's account. Conjecture lost itself on every side. His first impulse was to question everybody in the village, in the hope of finding some clue to the direction which she had taken on quitting Abbot's-Nook; but as the day wore away the ferment of his mind subsided, and he reasoned with himself that, for good or for ill, Rachael was free to take her own course without reference to any advice or wish of his. If she had stayed and needed help, he would have helped her; but she had not sought his aid; she was gone, and all was over between them.

There was but one point upon which he, as well as the other villagers, severely blamed her; it was for having left her father to be buried by strangers. It was known to every-

body that she had had no cause to love or respect him during his life-time; but there was nevertheless a strong feeling in the village that she ought to have done her 'last duty' by him, and 'seen him put into the earth.'

She was beyond the reach of this adverse criticism, however, carrying with her her reasons, good or bad, for having left this 'duty,' if it was one, unfulfilled. And perhaps it was best that she was not at the grave-side; for the sound of the dull earth beating on her father's coffin would not have drowned in her soul the cry of unforgiving condemnation that rose against his memory, and curses instead of prayers might have escaped from her lips.

The funeral was soon arranged, and, in three days from the time of his death, Jacob Summer was taken with scant ceremonial to the churchyard, and put away in a corner in the midst of a bed of rankly-grown nettles. No relation followed him to the grave, into which no tear of regret was shed by any mortal eye. His neighbours lent a hand to

shovel the dank earth over him, and when the clods were roughly shaped into a mound, and all was done, perhaps there was one thought uppermost in the minds of the assistants:

'Pity he hadn't been buried long before.'

Three days later, and the churchyard of Abbot's-Nook presented a very different spectacle. Joseph Allgrip, borne with all the grim state that wealth can place about the dead, was brought to his final resting-place—not in a weed-stifled corner of death's-acre, but in a 'magnificent sarcophagus,' as the deeply affected reporter of the county newspaper correctly as well as elegantly described the pompous receptacle.

High and low, rich and poor, gathered about the coffin. Mr. Ghills, the rector, moved all hearers by the impressive manner in which he delivered the most impressive of the services of the Church. Women, wearing at that solemn moment evidences of Mrs. Allgrip's profuse charities, sobbed for the departed. That highly-respected and well-to-do husband,

father, and tax-payer, the landlord of the Red Lion, wiped his eyes within sight of the mourners in the great Allgrip pew. Mr. Sifter used his pocket-handkerchief freely; and Mr. Gattens had, as all present might have remarked, much difficulty in restraining his feelings within due bounds.

In the sight of heaven, no; there is no inequality in death; but seeing what we see sometimes, we have a hard struggle to believe that heaven's great justice holds good on earth.

By the time the nettles were well grown over Jacob Summer's grave-heap, a golden inscription on Joseph Allgrip's sarcophagus told of an eminent, and remarkably good, and well-beloved man passed away.

Did these chosen sentences bear witness to the truth? What shall we say? Was not the most skilful mason whose talents could be bought for money as able to form an opinion as we? and did he not undertake to record the high merits of the dead, carved in enduring marble, and double gilt, at so much per

letter? Let the glittering inscription stand, false or true; of this at least we may be satisfied, that the buried man was not the worst piece of human clay ever tableted with virtues not all its own.

As the proverb says: 'It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.' To the *quorum* of the Red Lion Joseph Allgrip's death and burial were decidedly satisfactory circumstances, inasmuch as they afforded an excellent opportunity for those gentlemen to make good their claim to represent the gentility and intelligence of their village. Of all dwellers therein they were, perhaps, least under the influence of the family at the 'great house;' but, as Falstaff has laid it down, 'instinct is a great matter;' and as 'the lion will not touch the true prince,' gentility, by the same rule of instinct, always knows exactly the correct course to take—at least in small communities like that of Abbot's-Nook.

On the morning after the funeral, a deputation, consisting of Mr. Sifter, Mr. Squills, and Mr. Gattens, representing all that was

most conservative in politics, enlightened in intellect, and respectable as to worldly position, in the village and immediately surrounding district, waited upon Mr. Ghills for the purpose of proposing to that gentleman the preparation and presentation of a respectful and sympathising address of condolence to Mrs. Allgrip. Being of the right leonine quality, as to instinct, the rector unhesitatingly undertook the task of preparing a rough draft of the proposed address for the consideration of the deputation, and furthermore consented to convey the document, when perfected, to the hands for which it was intended.

In this manner, and in due course, all that instinctive gentility and active intelligence could do in Abbot's-Nook was done there in honour of the house of Allgrip. The *quorum* were perfectly contented with themselves, and the rector had no cause to regret the part he played in the genteel ceremonial of which they were the refined instigators.

Mr. Ghills was a thin man, grey as to hair, but deceptive as to age. Something in his

manner conveyed the idea of his being a man always at work; but nobody knew of his ever doing anything beyond the duties of his office, which were not heavy, and which he performed well within bounds. Without looking in the least stern, or even particularly grave, it might not unreasonably have been inferred, from the ordinary expression of his face, that he had never consciously smiled at anything in the course of his life.

Very little was seen of him, and even less known. There was an impression amongst his parishioners that he had been married and lost his wife before he became rector of Abbot's-Nook; but nobody could ever speak of the fact as within his own knowledge. The effect of his character, indeed, was generally to leave him unknown. He was a man to be forgotten quickly; a man towards whom nobody was drawn, to make whose acquaintance nobody would go an inch out of his way.

Why he had entered the Church nobody knew; by what means he had made his way, only such as were learned in the disposition of

Church preferments could have told, beside himself. Abbot's-Nook was decidedly not a religious village, and he had decidedly never attempted to bring about a different state of things. He was not the man to have succeeded, even if he had undertaken the labour; not because the people of his parish disliked him, but because they did not like him. They had nothing to say against him, but neither had they anything to say in his favour. They would have been quite content to accept the whiteness of his linen as a sufficient guarantee of his orthodoxy and personal respectability; but in no house, and least of all in any cottage in Abbot's-Nook, would a visit from him have been a source of lively pleasure.

At the Hall Mr. Ghills stood upon a better footing. During Joseph Allgrip's lifetime he had several times been invited there to dinner; and although these formal visits had led to no sustained intimacy with the family, they had not led to his being held in any disesteem. The occasion of the presentation of the address of condolence enabled him to appear to good

advantage before Mrs. Allgrip, who saw in him a convenient companion during the period of her enforced seclusion. And it was soon remarked that Mr. Ghills became a regular evening visitor at the Hall, where he made one at Mrs. Allgrip's whist-table with Lady Downhill and her daughter.

For Miss Downhill, Mrs. Allgrip exhibited a strongly marked interest; an interest which might have been owing in a considerable degree to the circumstances under which that young lady's position had been referred to on the night of Joseph Allgrip's death. Mrs. Allgrip was not superstitious, but she could not get rid of the idea that it was a duty she owed to the departed to endeavour to carry out what appeared to be his latest wishes.

No farther discussion took place between Marten and his mother relative to Miss Downhill; but he did not fail to observe the new footing on which she was received at the Hall. The occurrence of that night had had a moving and softening influence with him. He had come to feel that, harsh and partly incoherent

as his father's last address to him on the subject had been, he had not acted towards Miss Downhill as became a gentleman. Under the conventional restraints of the mourning period, he went out very little; and as Miss Downhill rarely missed a day in visiting his mother, he was thus brought very frequently into her society.

They were not made to understand each other readily; but by degrees he grew used to meet her pleasantly. As his father had said, without really knowing how literally he was describing the fact, she was in every respect Marten's superior. During the long autumn evenings her accomplishments enabled her to make the family life at the Hall something more than tolerable. Marten learned to look forward to her singing, to take pleasure in performing for her all the offices of good breeding, to place her stool, to turn her music, to praise her execution, and generally to think of her comfort as well as his own.

Mrs. Allgrip saw that he did all this, and

was silently happy, having learned to manage Lady Downhill so as to keep her as much as possible out of Marten's way, and thus out of the way of danger. As for Letitia, she was born to be what others made her; as for her mother, *she* looked with impatient eyes beyond the slow-creeping months of mourning.

Slow as their flight may have seemed to Lady Downhill, the months fled fast enough, through the autumn and through the winter.

With the spring, Marten, who had for some time been feeling the want of change of scene and companionship, went up to London, leaving his mother at the Hall, with Lady Downhill and her daughter regularly located there for the sake of their society. Having plenty of money at his command, and youthful spirits long kept under restraint, he soon found friends, and, in a word, justified the foresight of those who had predicted that he would 'go the pace.'

CHAPTER IX.

RACHAEL AND MARTEN MEET AGAIN.

With the exception of a few brief visits paid to his mother, at the Hall, Marten spent the spring and succeeding summer entirely in London. In that time he drank freely of the cup of pleasure, whose nectar rarely delights, and never assuages the fever-thirst of the riotous drinker. He was sowing his wild oats with an unstinting hand—a barren harvest being the least unfavourable return that could result to him.

The months sped so rapidly that he found the days only too short to hold the entertainments that were ever ready to over-fill them. Occasionally a thought of Rachael crossed his mind, but the knowledge that she was gone from Abbot's-Nook, no one knew whither,

produced within him something like a sense of relief. He accepted her flight as a convenient turn given to an affair in which he had played a foolish part, and dismissed the subject from his memory.

His lodgings, at the Hyde-park end of Piccadilly, were the envy of more than one his new friends, who, all of them, when he was at home—and often when he was not—made his home theirs. Indeed, these loud-laughing, if not truly gay, citizens of the world of youthful folly, used freely, not only his chambers, but his horses, his well-filled purse, and other things that were his; and freest of all these free-and-easy friends was the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh.

Marten had made acquaintance with this gentleman—or, more correctly speaking, this gentleman had made acquaintance with Marten—on almost the first day of his arrival in London. He was just the man of all others that Marten desired to know, and just the last man with whom it was desirable for any young man in Marten's position to be on terms of

intimacy. His merit, in Marten's eyes, was that he could do everything that young men with nothing to do most desire to achieve. He shot splendidly, with other men's guns; he rode magnificently, other men's horses; he fished, with other men's tackle, so that the fish seemed to be charmed out of the stream; he was a master of all games of skill; and in games of chance his luck was wonderful.

The reputation of the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh glittered with other attributions, of which he was even more proud, and of which some of his friends were more than a little jealous.

He was a handsome man, as far as form and features were concerned; but an uglier-souled man, perhaps, could not have been picked out of any well-dressed assembly in London on the day when Marten first shook hands with him. In one thing, and in one thing only, he thoroughly believed—in his right to exercise his own powers, natural and acquired, for his own particular pleasure and profit.

On leaving Cambridge he had gone into a cavalry regiment, from which, after a very few years, during which he had seen some service, he had found it convenient to sell out — an act of indulgence on the part of the authorities permitting him, it was said, to avail himself of a privilege not strictly due to him. Something had happened in the regiment: the Honourable Captain Hawksleigh had been *too* lucky in play with a rich young subaltern, and for the credit of the regiment and of the Honourable Captain Hawksleigh's family, it was determined that that too highly accomplished officer and gentleman should have the option of selling out, or of submitting to a court-martial.

After the adjustment of that difficulty, his father, Lord Broadweir, made him a small allowance, but sternly refused ever to see him again; and, in fact, he found himself entirely excluded from his family. The effects of this chastisement were not happy; for the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh only learned from the lesson read to him, the necessity thence-

forth for playing his cards in the game of life with extra precaution as well as with skill.

Great familiarity with the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh, if not exactly calculated to produce the proverbial result, contempt, was pretty certain to induce a marked diminution of esteem for that gentleman. The very variety of his resources for killing time and spending money became a tax upon Marten's patience after a while.

It was not that Marten became jealous of his friend's eternal prominence in the day's business of pleasure; but an uneasy sense began to grow upon him, of being too much in the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh's power, and he had thoughts of shaking-off his constant companionship. That was a thing more easily thought of than done, however.

There was no lack of spirit on Marten's side, but he shrank from giving open offence to the man whose society he had courted while it was agreeable to him. The Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh, moreover, was not a man whom it was easy to offend. But, though slow to

take offence, there was something in his manner under provocation suggestive of dangerous resentment whenever he might consider himself aggrieved.

The Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh was by no means blind to the outward signs that from time to time gave indication of Marten's altered mood, and while Marten was chafing under his own inability to determine what course he should take to free himself from his honourable friend's no longer welcome attentions, had perfectly made up his mind as to his own course of action. This was the position in which they stood towards each other, when the great sporting event of the year, the race for the Derby, came round.

Marten's party was a small but very gay one. It had been arranged by the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh, and was made up of that gentleman, Marten, a Monsieur Achille Vautour, Madame his wife an Englishwoman, and a younger lady, her sister. Marten would have been glad to have contracted the party still farther, by the exclusion of his honour-

able friend; but that was not possible, and he could only force himself to bear with as good a grace as he could assume what was, under the circumstances, an infliction. The day was bright and warm; the conversation uncontrolled, the champagne unlimited, and he would have forgotten his irritation under the excitement of the occasion, if it had not been renewed from a fresh source.

The horses entered to run in the great race were being walked before the grand stand, and the latest odds were being given and taken. Marten had been struck by the beauty of the favourite, and, in his enthusiasm, offered to back him for any amount. The Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh had thereupon introduced him to another honourable gentleman, who had offered Marten three to one against the horse of his predilection.

Marten had closed with the offer for 5,000*l.*; and it might have been observed that, until the bet was irrevocably entered in the 'books' of the two high contracting parties, the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh bit his right thumb-nail

nervously, and carefully avoided meeting the eyes of his acquaintance, the other honourable gentleman, who appeared to be unknown to Monsieur Vautour and the ladies.

In due time, the race was run—one of the slowest races on record, the learned in such matters affirmed—and the favourite came in third. Marten was greatly mortified by this result, and his irritation was increased by the raillery of the two ladies.

'Five thousand pounds!' cried the younger of the two, who was conspicuous even among the conspicuous ladies who were so numerous on the course, from being dressed entirely in rose-coloured silks; 'your friend is in luck, Hawksleigh, and poor Marten will have to go without new gloves for three months at least to make up for his loss!'

A rude retort sprang to Marten's lips, but he overcame the impulse to utter it. The two ladies laughed boisterously, and Monsieur Vautour suggested champagne as the natural antidote to all of disappointment and of vexation.

The Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh affected to be absorbed in the programme of the races that had been run.

'O, come, don't be down in the mouth, Marten, *mon cher!*' cried Madame Vautour, who, from being dressed wholly in sky-blue silks, was scarcely less conspicuous than her sister. 'Have some more champagne, and call that gipsy yonder to tell us our fortunes all round; perhaps she may tell you of another friend of Hawksleigh's who will give you your revenge at Ascot—where we all mean you to take us, so don't forget the engagement.'

Neither of the ladies was in the least aware of the mischief she was doing, in coupling the names of the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh and his friends with the subject of Marten's mortification.

'It's infernally disagreeable to lose, of course,' said the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh; 'but, in betting, it's win or lose; lose to-day, win to-morrow. Don't let the affair put you out; I'll keep my eyes open for you at the Ascot.'

'I think, Hawksleigh, by the time the Ascot is run, I shall be able to manage my own affairs,' cried Marten angrily; 'or, at all events, without your help. I've had pretty nearly enough of your management.'

The blood mounted to the cheeks of the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh, but he was too much master of himself to make any reply. Monsieur Vautour maintained an expressive silence. The two ladies were uneasy. For a few minutes there was an uncomfortable pause, which was ended by Madame Vautour suggesting that the horses should be put to the carriage and the party taken back to town.

In a brief space they were on the noisy, dusty, and tolerably-dangerous home-route to London. Monsieur Vautour sat in front, alongside of the driver; Marten and the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh rode in the body of the carriage, *vis-à-vis* with Madame Vautour and her sister.

Taking advantage of the earliest opportunity, when the attention of the ladies was

withdrawn for a moment, the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh said in a low tone:

'I must beg of you, Allgrip, whatever you may choose to say to me at another time, not to address me again in the presence of these ladies in the way you did a little time ago, on the course.'

'I don't know that I stand in any need of schooling,' was the only answer Marten chose to make.

An almost imperceptible shrug was the reply of the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh, as he turned to Madame Vautour's sister and set himself to the task of amusing her—a task in which he was abundantly successful, if the lady's loud laughter was an index of her enjoyment.

Mirth is contagious, and Marten's ill-temper somewhat improved under the genial influence.

By the time the party reached town, it had been arranged that they should dine together that evening at Monsieur Vautour's house in Duke-street, St. James's.

Marten alighted at the door of his lodgings in Piccadilly, while the others went on in the carriage.

'Don't be late, Marten,' cried Madame Vautour, as the carriage moved off; 'and don't forget to send on that champagne!'

'Nor my half-dozen of *parfait amour!*' cried her sister.

A crowd had in a moment assembled on the pavement to stare at the party, and to catch any word that might be said.

Among these idlers was a woman, whose eager half-frightened looks indicated that something more than vulgar curiosity had drawn her to the spot. She forced her way to Marten's side, and, as he was stepping into the house, laid her hand upon his arm, and said, with an almost breathless voice:

'Mr. Allgrip, pray let me speak to you!'

Marten turned in surprise, which instantly changed to anger, as he recognised the speaker. It was Rachael, but so altered by suffering that nearly every trace of youth had vanished from her face. Scarcely a year

had elapsed since those two had met, but she looked ten years older.

'Confound you, woman!' cried Marten; 'how dare you come to me in this way!'

'O, sir!' she pleaded, terrified by the unexpected harshness of her reception.

'Take yourself off,' cried Marten, 'and never let me see you here again!'

She fell back as if he had struck her, and the sharp sound of the closing door beat upon her brain like the report of a piece of artillery. She did not faint, but, unconscious of what she was doing, staggered away.

Many and many who saw her that evening, passing blindly through the crowded streets, thought that she was dazed with drink. Late in the night she might have been seen lying insensible in a poor house at the far East-end of London, a woman and doctor at her bedside.

'She's too low to bear to lose any blood,' said the doctor; 'I think I'll wait till the morning. But she must be watched during the night.'

'And the child, sir?' asked the woman.

'How old do you say?'

'About two months, sir.'

'Well, you must feed it till she comes to, and then the best thing for her will be to put it into her arms; it may soothe her.'

'Poor thing!' said the woman; 'I wish to heaven I knew who her friends are; but I'm terribly afraid she hasn't any. She isn't a Londoner, and I suspect she's been wandering about for weeks and weeks in the hopes of meeting somebody she wants to see. This morning she went out early, and as she was so weak I persuaded her, as I was going to be at home all day myself, to leave her child with me. When she came back to-night she didn't seem to know what she was doing, and before I could get her to take bit or sup, she fell off her chair. I—I hope, sir, you don't think the poor thing will die?'

Rachael did not die; but all that night, and for many days and nights afterwards, her life seemed scarcely to hold by her.

Marten kept his appointment, and dined

at Monsieur Vautour's. At dinner he drank a good deal too much, and even the blandishments of Madame Vautour and the sprightly allurements of her sister failed to prevent his becoming quarrelsome. As a means of diverting him, the hostess proposed cards, but, with a reckless disregard of consequences not uncommon to tipsy irritability, he said, directing his words at the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh:

'I've ceased to find cards amusing; I'm not clever enough to be always so lucky at play as Hawksleigh.'

At last the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh had taken offence. He rose from his seat, and the look of dangerous resentment which has been noticed as characteristic of him under provocation was in his face and manner. The ladies sprang from their chairs in vague apprehension. Monsieur Vautour bit the ends of his moustache, and muttered '*Bête!*'

'Sit down, Hawksleigh, sit down!' cried Madame Vautour; 'you see he's had too much wine!'

But the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh crossed the room to where Marten sat, and said to him:

'Mr. Allgrip, I gave you a word of warning this evening, on our way back from Epsom; you have not heeded it; and I now give you another, which you will find it well not to disregard. You have just uttered a slanderous insinuation; that you must instantly withdraw, and apologise to these ladies for having disturbed their evening's amusement in so ungentlemanly a manner; otherwise, I hope you have been sufficiently well-bred to know what farther will be expected of you.'

White with rage, Marten sprang to his feet, and his first impulse was to strike the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh in the face; but Madame Vautour's sister threw her arms about him, and prevented the rash act.

'Very well,' said the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh; 'a friend of mine will call upon you to-morrow, to learn the address of any friend of yours who will permit you to refer

to him. Ladies,' he added, turning to Madame Vautour and her sister, 'good-night. Don't keep this well-mannered young gentleman out too late, or let him have any more wine, if you care for his health.'

With these words he left the room, followed by Monsieur Vautour.

Marten took his leave shortly afterwards and walked home. As he passed westward along Piccadilly, the early light of morning enabled him to distinguish the faces of two persons in a cabriolet driven in the direction of Duke-street. Had he turned back and followed the vehicle, he might have ascertained that it stopped at Monsieur Vautour's door, and that its occupants—the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh and his friend of the race-course who had won five thousand pounds of Marten—were admitted and shown up to the still-lighted drawing-room of Madame Vautour.

It was, perhaps, as well that Marten did not ascertain these facts, and that he never knew the business transacted on this occasion: how his five thousand pounds were dis-

posed of, to whom, and in what proportions. He had quite enough on his hands, in the settlement of accounts with the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh.

CHAPTER X.

RACHAEL AND WILL MEET AGAIN.

Early on the morning of the second day after Marten had dined at the house of Monsieur Vautour, two hackney-coaches passed up the High-street of Putney and on to Wimbledon-common, the first containing the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh and his friend, the other, Marten, his second, and a surgeon.

Upon reaching the common the seconds alighted and held a brief consultation as to the spot to which they should conduct their evil-disposed principals. After being driven forward a few hundred yards in the direction of a windmill, which then stood on the common, a little to the left of the road to Roehampton, the whole party were set down, and made their way to a grassy hollow, where

their proceedings would be secure from intrusive observation.

Marten's second not being authorised to offer any apology for the wrong done to the fair fame of the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh, there remained to be performed only the duty of loading the pistols and placing the antagonists. The preliminary arrangements were soon made, and the would-be spillers of each other's blood faced one another.

Marten was no coward; but the look of vindictive determination which he saw in the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh's face sent the blood back cold to his heart, and for a moment he fancied himself under the influence of a horrible dream. He was quickly master of himself, however. The signal was given, and he fired instantly.

The Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh had a narrow escape. His hat, torn from his head, fell several paces behind him, and he almost lost his footing; but he recovered his position in a moment, and as he did so a small stream of blood poured down one side of his face,

making terrible the rage that flashed from his eyes.

'Stand off!' he cried fiercely to his second, who was moving towards him; 'stand off! I've not fired yet!'

The second went back to his place, and the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh raised his pistol quickly, and without taking any unfair advantage.

Marten felt that he was covered by the deadly weapon; he thought of his mother's coming agony, and involuntarily raised his right hand as if to appeal for mercy from his foe. In all probability the movement saved his life. He saw the flash of his antagonist's pistol, and at the same instant felt himself struck down.

The ball had destroyed one of the fingers of his right hand and fractured one of his ribs, an injury grave enough, but far short of that which the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh had intended to inflict upon him.

It was a sharp lesson in life for Marten,

and not without softening influence, at all events for a time.

The reflection that he was freed from the society of the Honourable Mr. Hawksleigh, though made under the smart of wounds that would mark him to the end of his days, was highly satisfactory to him. The news of his illness could not well be kept from his mother, and it was therefore communicated to her, but of course with the particulars of the duel withheld. Before she reached town he was well on the road to convalescence, though she started an hour after the letter informing her of his condition was placed in her hands.

She was too shrewd a woman not readily to discover that the whole truth had not been told to her, and she knew that no good would come of asking questions; so during the weeks that Marten was house-bound, she only watched and hoped that he might be the better for the suffering through which he was passing, the first he had ever felt.

Instead of going back to Abbot's-Nook,

Marten and his mother went to Hastings, where, at the invitation of Mrs. Allgrip, they were joined by Lady Downhill and her daughter.

It was a bold experiment, and successful to the fullest extent of Mrs. Allgrip's hopes. In spite of the quiet which characterised the intercourse of the party, so utterly unlike anything to which he had been latterly used, Marten felt that in such *réunions* there were sources of pleasure not discoverable in the more fervid circle of Madame Vautour.

Without effort on her part, Miss Downhill, mediocre as her beauty was, more than held her own in Marten's mind, compared with Madame Vautour's sister. The comparison was not in itself gracious; but Marten's was not a refined intelligence, nor was he possessed of any very delicate susceptibilities. It is more than probable, also, that his mother would have regarded with pleasure her son's preference, even though she had known the ungracious comparison on which it was founded. Daily she became more and more at ease on

the subject of the marriage which she had at heart, and felt that she had only to watch for the right moment to gain her son's consent.

Lady Downhill, who during the past winter had grown to be more deaf and touchy than ever, was judicious enough to leave affairs entirely in Mrs. Allgrip's hands, and to be as little as possible seen by Marten. As for Letitia, she was prepared to accept whatever future her mother might succeed in making for her.

So the months went quietly by, and at last the right moment came, and Mrs. Allgrip won from Marten his consent to accept Miss Downhill for his wife; and it was arranged that the wedding should take place in the autumn.

And all this time Marten had not a thought of Rachael? Not a thought, from first to last —not one thought.

On the night of her wretched father's death, when she stole away from Abbot's-Nook, she had awakened from the vain brief dream in which she had forgotten herself,

under the influence of Marten's heartless addresses. The accusing voice in her bosom condemned her, and found excuses for him. Her fault had been of her own seeking, as it appeared to her, and already it was repented in tears of bitter hopelessness.

One resolution was strong in her mind—that she would never again see Marten; never. She took the roads that led towards the sea, hoping to come upon some place where she might earn the means of living without being subjected to too close a scrutiny. That there were hazards common to such a life she knew; but she saw that she had no choice, and must dare, and guard herself as she best might. She was young, strong, used to hard work, and thought herself fortunate in finding employment as servant in a road-side public-house.

Fortunate in having secured the means of living! Before she had become even used to her new mode of life a terror seized upon her soul, and made her hourly quail before the idea of being obliged to live. Will's terrible

words, addressed to her on the common, rang again and again in her ears, and she inwardly shrieked:

'Why did he not kill me! O, why did he not kill me!'

The days and weeks flew by, and the terror grew more wild, until life became a convulsion, a giant struggle between two influences—Nature's claim to self-preservation and the clamorous beseechment of the terror itself to be hidden in the grave.

At length the moment came when she could no longer hope to hide her secret from the familiar eyes about her. But whither was she to turn her steps? Again and again she thought of making her condition known to Marten; but her heart revolted from farther intercourse with him. Again and again the accusing voice cried, that he was nothing to her, that her misery and shame were hers alone. But where was she to seek shelter? To whom was she to confide her secret?

One thought only was clear to her: she must betake herself to some place where she

was unknown—it mattered little where, so that no one in it knew her. On the pretext of being too weak to do the work required of her, but not before suspicion had been awakened in the mind of her mistress, she quitted the Flying Fish, and wandered forth upon a blind pilgrimage.

With no settled purpose, she took the way towards London; but having taken that road, the idea came into her mind that in the great city possibly, if she could only reach it, there might be a better chance of preserving her secret than in the country, where all are used to know their neighbour's business as well as their own.

But even if London had offered her the certainty of an asylum, she found that it would be impossible for her to arrive there. Compelled to travel on foot, and to take as little food as would sustain life, from the necessity of husbanding her scanty supply of money, she had only reached to within twenty miles of London when she sank under the stress of bodily

fatigue and mental anguish. And her secret was a secret no longer.

In England, however harshly we may deal with such as Rachael, wanderers for the marked track of virtue and prudence, we do not suffer them absolutely to die by the wayside. Our pity may preserve them for an infinitely worse fate; but we cannot bear to see them die before our eyes. Perhaps, in the ripeness of the appointed time, we shall not think that our whole duty has been done when we have scared Death from a willing victim, and passed her on to meet him at another turning on Life's road, less ready, it may be, for the meeting.

Shattered in health and wild with misery, Rachael made her way forward to London at the earliest possible moment, her object being to seek Marten and crave assistance for his child. For weeks and weeks, not knowing to whom to apply for direction, she vainly sought him. How she found him at last, and what it availed her, has been shown.

Death once more seized upon her, and well-

nigh carried off his victim; but she lived on, though with impaired powers of mind and body.

Again the question: whither was she to bend her steps? In all the world there was but one person to whom her thoughts turned with any hope of sympathy, and the idea was incomprehensible even to herself; that person was Will.

Often scarcely conscious of what she was doing, miserably begging her way, she slowly returned towards Abbot's-Nook. She had formed no plan; she knew that in going back there she was going to meet certain shame and wretchedness; but she was under the spell of an inexplicable impulse to seek Will — not with any intention of beseeching his forgiveness, not with the desire of even seeing him again — to be near him only, that he might know where and when she died. For death was the end of all her thoughts and wishes.

With Will, the time she had been away had, for the most part, been spent in a hard

struggle for life. Monstrous as it was, the ban which Marten's anger had put upon him, and the first effect of which had been to drive him out of Farmer Rickson's service, hung upon him still more heavily when, at Joseph Allgrip's death, the young 'squire' became the dreaded master of the land of Abbot's-Nook. It was only on ground free from the influence of the Hall that he could get work; and he had lost, moreover, a great part of the spirit that had made him valuable as a farm-labourer.

His poverty forbade his drinking deeply, but with the irregularity of his employment his habits gradually became irregular. He lounged moodily about the village, and on Sundays, when the weather was fair, he might be found at almost any hour stretched on the sandy common, sleeping or idly smoking. The respectability which nightly assembled in the parlour of the Red Lion, and had its eye upon everything and everybody in Abbot's-Nook, saw clearly that he had gone to the bad—a poacher, Mr. Sifter was almost pre-

pared to swear; a smuggler, Mr. Gattens more than half suspected.

Poor Will! The dog was rapidly acquiring the dangerous distinction of the 'bad name;' in due course, the *quorum* would unhesitatingly consign him to the gallows.

Weary, faint, and at moments absolutely unconscious, Rachael approached the outskirts of Abbot's-Nook, a year and a month, almost to the day, from the night when she had fled thence.

Her child slept in her arms, and she sat down by the side of the common to think once more of what she was to do—of what she *could* do. Only one idea presented itself clearly in her mind—that to Will alone could she apply for help; Will, the man she had so cruelly wronged, was the last soul to whom she could turn for human charity.

It was night, dark with the gathering clouds of an impending thunderstorm, as she sat there and could think but of Will, and could yet form no resolve to go to him. At length her child awoke with a low fretful

cry. The shrill voice made her start to her feet.

'No, no, no!' she cried; 'I will not go to him. Heaven help me, I am all alone! — I have no home, no shelter, no one to go to!'

Her child's cry rose louder and sharper in its fretfulness. She tried to soothe her infant, but it would not be pacified, and its voice seemed to bewilder her. She peered around, as if in search of some hole in the ground in which to hide herself and her misery. Still the child's cries rang over the common and would not be checked.

'O, baby, baby!' she almost screamed, 'you will drive me mad!'

Again she tried to soothe her child, but it only cried the louder. Pressing it wildly to her, she hurried across the common, without purpose and without observing the path upon which she was going. But suddenly she stopped, and a stifled shriek broke from her lips: she had reached the very spot at which Will had confronted her a year before.

Delirium seized upon her brain. She

dropped her child and rushed blindly forward towards the beck. But before she could make the plunge, a man sprang from the wooden bridge and clutched her in his arms.

The check brought her back to consciousness for a moment, and she recognised her preserver.

'Will!' she shrieked, 'O don't hold me; let me go—let me go!'

'Don't fear me; I'll not harm you, Rachael,' cried Will sadly.

'Harm me! O, if you would do me a kindness, kill me, Will, kill me!' she cried. 'I can't bear to live! Let me—'

She fell back in his arms senseless, and he laid her gently on the ground.

CHAPTER XI.

THE QUORUM SCANDALISED.

Leaving the child to cry as loudly as it liked, Will did all he could to bring the mother back to consciousness. He fetched water from the beck, bathed her forehead and moistened her white lips; but for a long time her insensibility seemed like that of death.

Better for her and better for him if the seeming had been reality.

He had truly loved her; loved her with a passion earnest, deep, and abiding, though comparatively his was not a demonstrative nature. He was a man to feel infinitely more than he ever expressed, or could ever express, in words. Rachael was no longer, could no longer, be what she had been to him. An adamantine wall — the mystery of a moral change—had been reared, and must stand for

evermore, between their hearts — a barrier which his affection, at least, could never pass.

But though no longer able to love her, he regarded her with a pity that, in its greatness, was a sort of love. Blameworthy as she was in his eyes, the native justice of his heart defended her against harsh judgment. Whatever her trespass, she had been more sinned against than sinning; he could forgive her; it was her betrayer he condemned with unrelenting sternness.

As he bent over her, his face pale as hers, no word escaped from his lips. A gloomy calmness, not unlike that which sustains the fatalist, possessed him. In the darkened space, between what she had been and what she might have been to him, he took his place with resignation.

Slowly Rachael returned to consciousness and the memory of her miserable state. She wept bitterly, and Will made no attempt to check the impetuous outpouring of her grief. The child at intervals continued its shrill

and fretful wailings. She turned towards it, and would have risen to go to where it lay, but Will silently fetched it and placed it in her arms. As she busied herself in pacifying it, her sobs were wildly renewed.

For a long while not a word was spoken by either.

'Leave me, Will—leave me,' she cried at length. 'I've forfeited every claim to your kindness I ever had. If you had let me end my wretchedness—for I am more wretched than I can bear to be, and am paying a fearful price for my wicked folly—I should be out of the way of doing farther harm to any one, and at rest. Leave me and forget me. I was never worth a thought of yours, and now I deserve only your disdain.'

'I don't disdain you, Rachael,' he answered her. 'What I now feel for you is pity. You haven't been most to blame; and even if you had, it is not for me to punish you. I know you have no friends to stand by you—now, when you most want them—friends from

whom you might rather take help than from me—'

He paused.

Her sobs broke forth with renewed intensity.

'I mean to say,' he continued, 'that nothing has happened to make me shut my door against you when no other door is ready to open to you. My roof might have been yours for good—I can only now ask you to take the shelter of it so long as you stand in need of it. Let me be the most I can be to you—a friend.'

'God bless you, God bless you, Will!' she cried through her sobs and bending lowly over her child; 'if my own heart had not been so bad, I might have known sooner how good yours is; and the knowing that might have saved me from all that I am now suffering, and made me worthy of you.'

'Come home with me,' he replied, 'and if I have any goodness it shall show itself in doing what it can to make you think less bitterly of your fate. You have your child to

mind, and you and it shall be freely welcome to a share of all I can earn. Come'—he raised her from the ground as he spoke—'you will barely have time to get under shelter before the rain falls.'

The well-meaning in his words penetrated the depths of her heart and drove out the thought of death crouching there. To let him shelter her, to owe to him life and the means of living, seemed—how she knew not—like offering an atonement for the wrong she had done him. But of words to tell him all she felt, she had none; the only sentences that rose coherently to her lips were:

'God bless you for ever and ever, Will! I wish I had been a better woman for your sake.'

He led her, still sobbing, across the common to the cottage in which he lived, walking silently by her and looking blindly out of the darkness of the hour towards the hours of a still darker future.

Will's dwelling-place was little more than a hovel. The ground-floor consisted of two

rooms, a brick-floored living-room and kitchen, called in the dialect of the county a *back'us*. Above the living-room was a loft, dignified by the name of bedroom, the rafters and rough flooring of which served for the ceiling of the room below it.

A small oak table, three rush-bottomed chairs and a turn-up bedstead, were the sole articles of furniture in the living-room. The mantelpiece was garnished with a tobacco-box of painted lead, placed exactly in the centre, and flanked, at equal distances, by two figures in delf-ware designed to represent Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and, beyond these again, a pair of brass candlesticks, displaying as much brightness as could be obtained out of the combined action of vitriol, whiting, and the friction of soft leather.

Over the tobacco-box was a coloured print of Abraham's Sacrifice in a metal frame, Abraham in yellow, Izaac in blue, and the descending angel in red; the rest of the picture, the sky and landscape portions, buff and green tempered with black. At nightfall the bed-

stead was opened out for use, and occupied the greater part of the middle space of the floor.

At the moment when Will lifted the latch of his door to enter this room, an elderly woman, Withers by name, a widow, tall, gaunt, bony-featured, and severely clean, was seated in front of the fire-place, in which there was no fire but, in its stead, an armful of faded heather. A small tallow-candle stood by her side upon the table, and gave a feeble yellow light, by which she was knitting.

Will's thoughts had, for some minutes before he reached his home, been of this woman, a distant relative of his, who had for several years kept his house in order and waited upon him in return for the shelter of his roof.

He knew the character of his housekeeper too well to expect that she would welcome the introduction of Rachael and her child into the household. To Rachael, however, he had said nothing on the subject, resolved as he was to over-ride all objection on the part of Mrs. Withers. Before confronting that hard-

visaged personage, he whispered Rachael to stay outside until he came to fetch her into the house.

Mrs. Withers looked up sharply from her knitting as he opened the door and entered, and instantly began to roll her work about her needles, on the ends of which she finally impaled a large ball of worsted which had been lying in her lap. That done, she rose and pushed back her chair, making it grate upon the sanded brick floor, before taking it up and putting it in its place by the wall near the head of the bedstead.

Her manner of moving the table was equally marked. As a demonstration of bad temper there was nothing in this that was new to Will, but it added to the difficulty which he already felt strongly enough, of saying what he had to say to her without provoking her to vent her bitterness of tongue on Rachael. He stood just within the door, conscious of all that she was doing without looking at her, and wholly unable to make up his mind as to the best way of addressing her.

She was the first to speak.

'Well,' she said, in a thin heady tone of voice, 'you don't seem to know whether you are going to stay, now you *are* come home. I should think it's quite late enough for you to be thinking of being a-bed; for my part, *I* should have been glad to have been in my bed long ago.'

Will moved farther into the room.

'It isn't late,' he answered. 'But if it had been, that's my affair, and to-night I'm home as early as I care to be.'

'I only know as you've been getting later and later for a long time—though, of course, *I* mustn't say anything about it. You're your own master.'

'As for that, you needn't trouble. I shall never say or do anything to make you feel I'm master here, so long as you don't act to make me think that my home is only mine in name.'

'We've no call to make it later than it is by talking,' replied Mrs. Withers, with a closeness of reasoning characteristic of women of

her moral stamp; '*I'm* waiting to get to my bed, if you're not.'

As she spoke she turned down the patchwork coverlid of her bed with a jerk, and then moved the candle from the table to the mantelpiece without obvious motive.

'I'm sorry I shall have to keep you up a little longer,' he said, becoming impatient under the perplexity of his position. 'What I said just now, as to my being master here, was not quite all I have to say. In my own house I have the right to do as I please, and something has happened to-night as makes it needful for me to use my right to the full; but though I use it so, it ought to make no difference to you; and I wish it may not. I've met with somebody with no home to go to, and I've given her a share of mine.'

Mrs. Withers was struck speechless for a moment. Will did not wait for her to recover her powers of utterance before following up the advantage he had thus gained.

'She is no stranger,' he continued; 'once this might have been her own home.'

'You don't mean to say,' gasped Mrs. Withers, 'that you've brought that—'

'Hush!' cried Will; 'I'll not allow you to call her names. It *is* Rachael Summer I've brought here—to the only shelter she has in the world; and here, at least, she must be safe from any one's upbraiding.'

'If *she* comes into the house, I go out of it!' cried Mrs. Withers, her face and the spotless white cap-border that enframed it becoming of one hue.

'You must do as you please in that respect,' replied Will. 'I can only hope you'll think better of it than to do what you say. Rachael, too, is sick, and ill able to tend her child.'

'Her child!' screeched Mrs. Withers. 'I'd have you to know that I'd rather beg my bread from door to door than wait on such a—'

'Silence!' cried Will. 'I tell you I will not let you call her names! You are free to go or stay; but if you stay, it shall not be to punish her who has already more than enough

to bear. I have more right to be hard with her than ever you can have, to whom she has done no wrong; and I have made up my mind to befriend her. She's outside, waiting till I fetch her in, for I feared you might have something to say against her coming here, and the question's for you and me to settle alone. I know what will be said of her in Abbot's-Nook, when it's known that she is back again; and I can guess what will be said of me for taking her into my house. Let the worst be said; I don't care what it may be. I know what my own feelings and motives are, and that others are not likely to understand these so well as I do myself. My course is taken, and if it makes some turn against me, I can't help it; but I shall be sorry if it parts us two.'

'You *will* be sorry, then,' cried Mrs. Withers; 'for I go out of your house the moment you bring her into it. I never have consorted with abandoned creatures like her, and I never will.'

'I tell you again,' cried Will sharply,

endeavouring to stop her, 'you have no right—'

'And I tell you,' she cried, raising her voice above his, 'that everybody with notions of decency in them will have the right to think that you are disgracing the respectable parents you come of; and they are happy in being in their graves, instead of living to see their son harbouring a—'

'Silence, woman!' he cried indignantly, the loud tone of his voice drowning the offensive epithet, whatever it was.

At the same instant, a dull rustling sound, as of something falling against the outer door, was heard. Will listened for a moment—while Mrs. Withers was new-arming her tongue—and then hurried to the door and opened it.

Rachael was lying insensible on the threshold, her child asleep in her arms. She had guessed Will's motive for leaving her outside his cottage while he confronted Mrs. Withers, and the sharp voice of that sternly moral, and, as she considered herself, shamefully in-

jured, person had soon informed her as to the light in which she was viewed, and as to the difficulties that would beset Will on every hand in acting as her protector.

She listened and heard all that he said, and blessed him for the generosity of his resolve to shield her; but the sacrifices he was prepared to make seemed to her greater than any she ought to accept from him; and for a moment she thought of at once flying from Abbot's-Nook and placing herself out of reach of his kindness. But to turn from him was to face loneliness and desolation. The thought almost made her scream with terror; her brain reeled, and for the second time that night she fell to the ground senseless.

A glance told Will what had happened. He took the still sleeping child from its mother's arms and would have laid it on the floor out of the way for a few minutes; but Mrs. Withers, who was a woman, though a hard one, took it from his hands and retired with it into the doorway of the kitchen, from which point of view she looked on with silent

indignation while he lifted Rachael and placed her on the bed.

That done, he would have relieved her of the child.

'I don't want you to do anything you don't like to do,' he said; 'but even if you have any place to go to, it's late for you to be going now. I shall not sleep to-night; you can have my bed, and in the morning, if you still wish to do so, you can go.'

'You'd best leave the child where it is,' said Mrs. Withers; 'you'll have quite as much as you'll be able to manage in looking after its mother. She looks as if she was dead already; and if she never gets up from where she's lying it'll be the best thing that can happen for herself and for you, in my opinion.'

'Perhaps,' he replied sadly.

He could do nothing but sprinkle cold water on the sallow pale face that lay on the pillow before him.

Mrs. Withers rendered him no assistance, but stood sternly and grimly nursing the sleeping child, and mentally piling mountains

of condemnation on its unconscious mother. For the most sweeping and pitiless judgments passed on women who have strayed, or who have been led, from the path of virtue, are always pronounced by women.

The minutes went by and Rachael gave no sign of recovery. As Will said, perhaps it would be best that she should never rise again from the bed whereon she was lying; but he could not see her die for want of any care that he could take of her. Nor could even Mrs. Withers have calmly confronted the idea of directly homicidal neglect. At her suggestion, heated vinegar and burnt feathers —the popular restoratives—were held to the nostrils of the insensible woman, but without effect. Will anxiously laid his hand upon her heart to assure himself that she was still living.

'She's beyond your doctoring or mine,' said Mrs. Withers; 'I should think you'd better go and ask Mr. Squills to come and see her.'

The same thought was in Will's mind, and he hastened to put it into execution.

Mr. Squills was in his place in the *quorum* of the Red Lion. A very interesting topic of conversation—specially interesting to Mr. Squills in his professional character, when viewed in relation with prospective possibilities—was engrossing the attention of the conclave.

News of Marten Allgrip's marriage and immediate return to the Hall had reached Mr. Sifter, and, with all due respect for the delicate nature of the intelligence, had been retailed to an attentive and highly-sympathetic audience. After the subject had been examined from every side, and all its bearings considered and exhaustively discussed, the ultimate opinions of the *quorum* appeared to be these: that, taking into account his position, the Squire might have done better than marry a penniless girl like Miss Downhill; that, on the other hand, he could not have chosen a lady to whom the *quorum* would more delight to pay its respectful homage.

This point of agreement had just been

reached when Mr. Squills was informed that he was wanted, and came out to Will, who was awaiting him in the passage which divided the Red Lion's open bar from its exclusive parlour.

'That girl Summer, eh?' cried Mr. Squills, when Will had told him what was the matter. 'Things are coming to a pretty pass! What have *I* to do with her? Why do you come to *me?*'

Will suggested that there was no other doctor in Abbot's-Nook, or he would not have troubled him.

'Upon my word, I think a lot of good-for-nothing people fancy doctors have nothing to do but be at their beck and call, day and night! Have you tried cold water on her face?'

Cold water *had* been tried.

'A few drops, I daresay—sprinkled as if you were afraid it would burn her!'

No; copiously. And vinegar, and burnt feathers also, had been tried in vain.

'And a baby!' cried Mr. Squills, too in-

dignant to be sequacious in his reasoning. 'Well, I suppose I must go and see her.'

It is only justice to Mr. Squills to say that all the time he was grumbling he was *going*. Will's earnestness had from the first convinced him that Rachael's case was urgent; and he was not an unfeeling old fellow, in spite of his rough way of speaking. He was a dog whose bark was any number of degrees worse than his bite. In fact, he was never known to bite at all.

When he reached his patient a change had taken place in her condition. The swooning fit in which Will had left her had passed away, and she was now violently delirious, writhing in the grasp of Mrs. Withers, who had wrapped the child in a shawl and put it down in a corner, while she prevented its mother from harming herself in her unconscious struggles. After a while the paroxysm subsided, and, with a cry between a sigh and a scream, Rachael lay panting and exhausted.

A moment's examination of her pulse, and the diagnosis of the case was apparently com-

plete in the mind of Mr. Squills, who then asked the age of the child, and being told by Mrs. Withers that its age was about three months, directed that it must be fed for a time. That preparatory direction given, he required to be furnished with a yard of tape, or anything of that sort, and a hand-basin, if there was such a vessel in the cottage.

Preparations for the performance of the operation of phlebotomy: which operation was duly performed by Mr. Squills, and did *not* (as later theories of therapeutics might demand) immediately kill the patient, but left her, as it were, precariously suspended between life and death.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. WITHERS OUTRAGED.

Mr. Squills, doing the best he could according to his lights, stayed with his patient as long as there appeared any likelihood of her requiring his professional care; and when at length he left her in charge of Will, he gave him full instructions as to what would have to be done for her, improving the occasion by the addition of many such remarks as these:

'Of course you've nothing she'll need—of course not, and haven't a shilling in the world to buy her anything, even if it were to save her life! You'll have to come to me for everything—confound you, of course you will!—and I sha'n't have a minute's peace with you till she's about again—if she ever gets about again—the hussey! Just mind you

don't forget anything I've told you, and be hanged to you!'

Having satisfied himself that he had strictly done his duty as a doctor and as one of the *quorum*, Mr. Squills—the Red Lion being closed for the night—went home to bed, and slept the sleep of the just.

As soon as the chuff but good-hearted doctor was gone, Mrs. Withers betook herself grimly upstairs to her bed, carrying with her Rachael's infant.

No doubt of the child's paternity entered her mind. She took it for granted that Will was its father; but this consideration did not in the smallest degree soften her towards its unhappy mother. She had been young herself, had known temptation and escaped the peril; but this worldly experience had only made her merciless towards those of her own sex who under a like trial had been less prudent or less fortunate than she had been.

Not a wink of sleep visited her eyelids; her indignation at what she considered Will's outrageous conduct, in openly giving protec-

tion to a woman whom all right-thinking people were bound to despise and shun, was too turbulently active to permit her to sleep. So she lay grimly awake, waiting till the morning, and resolved that either Rachael must be sent out of the cottage, or that the threat she had already expressed, of herself leaving it, should be at once put in execution.

Through the long hours of the night Will sat near the bed on which Rachael lay, only at intervals dimly conscious of his presence. He looked at her only when she made some feeble attempt to move ; but all the while he was thinking of her and of the time that was before them both.

'I know it will be said her child is mine,' he thought. 'Well, let it be so, since him as is its father can never be a father to it. She has nobody else in the world to turn to but me, and if I forgive her the wrong she has done me, what does it matter to me what anybody may say of what I do. I won't drive her away, to let her die of starvation, or to do worse—her as I thought once to

make my wife, and who has been to me more than she or any other woman can ever be again. Her ill-doing carries with it its own punishment—ay, a double share. God help her; and she'll want all the help He can give her, let me do the best I can for her in her trouble.'

He sat with his elbows resting on his knees, and his forehead supported by his open palms; from his birth but one degree removed from abject poverty, illiterate, in knowledge the inferior of many a little child; but, if I am not mistaken, not wholly worthless, his soul not wholly dark—at least a tiny spark of divine goodness illuminated it, I think, at that moment.

Rachael faintly whispered his name, and he turned his face towards her.

'Do you want anything?' he asked.

'Nothing, Will. Did the doctor tell you I should die?'

'Die?'

'I hope he did. I hope I shall not live to be a burden to you, Will. I owe you too

much—too much— more than I can ever pay back to you, without living to take the bread from your mouth.'

'You'd do better not to say such things, Rachael. If you've got to live you must live; and so long as I have bread to eat you shall not want, and you'll owe me no more than you might have owed me if—if—I'm not saying it unkindly — if you had been my wife.'

'God bless you, Will! I was never good enough for you. Perhaps it has been for the best that I did not become your wife, or, vain and wicked-hearted as I was, I might have done something to make you hate and curse me.'

'Keep yourself quiet, Rachael; you'll do yourself harm by talking so; and you've to strive to live and get well, for your child's good. Try and sleep.'

He rose and passed into the kitchen, where he quietly busied himself with making up the turf fire on the hearth and setting the kettle to boil against the coming breakfast-time.

Then, pale and fatigued, he sat himself down by the chimney-side and after a while fell into an unrefreshing half-slumber, from which he was aroused by the entrance of Mrs. Withers into the kitchen.

It was daylight, and Mrs. Withers was, under any circumstances, a short sleeper and an early riser. She had not been to sleep at all, however, on this occasion; nevertheless she looked as keenly awake as if she had enjoyed the repose of one of the Seven Sleepers.

She wore the snowy cap, and generally the dress, she had worn on the previous night; but she had added a dark shawl, crossed over her stern bosom and tied in a knot at her back; and in her hands she carried a large bundle and a white straw bonnet with severe-looking black strings. In the cold gray light that found its way through the kitchen casement, her appearance was grim and inflexible as a granite statue.

'Now,' she said, as soon as she saw that Will recognised the fact of her presence, 'I

wish to know which of us is to leave this place—I or that girl?'

'It cannot be Rachael,' answered Will sadly.

'More shame for you to say it!' replied Mrs. Withers, putting on her bonnet.

'It would be a greater shame for me not to say it, Mrs. Withers. Do you know what must become of her if I was to turn my back on her?'

'Nothing more than she deserves, I'm quite sure.'

'What she deserves isn't a question for either you or me to settle. Whatever wrong she has done will be visited on her, without either you or me taking it on ourselves to decide what her punishment ought to be.'

'No doubt you think yourself very clever to talk in such a fashion; I only hope you're not going to crown your folly by marrying the degraded hussey!'

An angry retort rose to Will's lips, but he only said:

'Folly or no folly, Rachael and me will never be man and wife.'

'What!' cried Mrs. Withers, 'do you mean her to live with you, then, in—in—bare-faced—'

'Hold your tongue, woman! your thoughts do you no credit. Rachael will be to me what a sister—a widowed sister—might be, nothing more, let who will say otherwise.'

'Many will say otherwise, never doubt it.'

'Let them! and let them as think wrong what I'm doing for her, do better for her, that's all I say.'

'You'll rue the day, Will Woodruff—take my word for it.'

'No; I'll not take your word for anything that concerns Rachael, for you can't understand either her or me, Mrs. Withers. I'm sorry for it, for your sake as well as for hers and mine.'

'O, don't waste sorrow on me; you'll have enough to bear, as you'll find out only too soon. For sixty years, girl, wife, and widow, I have kept a good name; and now I'd rather lay myself down by the roadside and die of hunger and cold than give any one

the right to say I don't act up to the principles I've always professed. I'd rather beg my food from village to village, and sleep under hedges and corn-ricks, than consent to live in this cottage with the shameless creature you've brought into it. Do as you like, I shall do what I know to be right.'

'You must do it, then. But I wish you could see your duty in another light; anyhow, I'm sorry to have to let you go away empty-handed.'

'There's no need for you to trouble about that. You owe me nothing, and I'm thankful to be able to say that, on my side, there is no greater obligation.'

That said, Mrs. Withers walked with a determined air to the outer door, raised the latch, and passed out of the cottage, leaving Will face to face with the moral and material difficulties of his position.

It was not possible for him to form any plan of conduct; all he could hope to do was to overcome each difficulty as it arose. The first was with regard to the care of Rachael's

child, whose shrill cry reached his ears almost at the same moment that Mrs. Withers took her departure.

At the best it must be several weeks before Rachael would be able to take charge of her infant. What was to be done with it during that time? He shrank before the idea of being the first to tell the story of her shame; yet this he must of necessity be if he sought the aid of any of the women of the village in behalf of her helpless little one. The story would be known soon enough, first through Mrs. Withers, and next through Mr. Squills; for that there was no help, but he would be no party to its dissemination.

To one person only—and that a man—he felt he could freely explain his position, and ask for assistance. That person was Farmer Rickson.

Pacifying the child's cries as he could, he satisfied himself that Rachael was asleep, and at once set off for the farmer's house. His own cottage stood somewhat removed from the village, and it was yet so early in the day

that scarcely anybody was abroad. It was easy for him, therefore, to reach the place to which he was bent without attracting inconvenient observation.

'Tell Mr. Rickson I'd be glad to speak with him here,' he said, addressing himself to a boy whom he found making ready to feed the farmer's pigs.

The boy stared with all his eyes on receiving this mysterious message for his master, and noticing Will's strange burden.

'Why, what a' ye got there?' he asked.

'Never you mind, Steeve, but go and do what I've asked of you.'

'Have ye picked him up somewhere?' inquired Steeve, his curiosity whetted by Will's attempt to put it off.

'Don't bother about what don't concern ye, but go and bring the master to me.'

Finding he was not likely to gain any satisfaction by pushing his inquiries any farther, he set down his wash-pail, and went towards the farmhouse, walking backwards every now and then for the sake of keeping

his still wondering eyes on Will and the baby.

Will waited under a cart-shed, out of sight of the house, and tried to arrange in his mind what he wanted to say to his former master; but the attempt was vain, and when, a few minutes later, he was joined by Rickson, the difficulty of the task he had undertaken appeared ten times greater than he had expected to find it.

The boy Steeve had not omitted to tell his master of the strange burden Will was carrying, and something of the boy's own surprise was visible in Rickson's face when he came where Will was awaiting him.

'What do ye want, Will? anything wrong wi' ye, man?' he asked, noticing Will's pale face and the troubled look it wore.

'I hardly know how to tell you why I've taken the liberty to apply to you, Mr. Rickson, only that you've always been a kind master, and always have taken an interest in me.'

'Damn them as made it dangerous for me to keep you on the farm, Will, I say!' ex-

claimed Rickson. 'But,' he added hotly, 'the day may not be far off when I shall be able to snap my fingers at all such gilded vermin; and when that day comes, Sam Rickson won't be the man to forget the best servant that ever took wages of him, or of any man!'

Will thanked him for this expression of goodwill, but could find no words to open up the subject about which he had come to speak with him.

'You want to say something to me, Will?'

'I do, Mr. Rickson, but I don't know how to say it. It's a strange favour I want to ask of you, sir, concerning this poor child, Rachael Summer's child.'

'Not yours, Will?'

'No, Mr. Rickson.'

'Speak out, man, all you want to say, for I know you wouldn't 'a come to me without some good reason for doing so. It's about this child of Rachael's you want to ask me to do something? It isn't yours—whose is it, then?'

'The master of the Hall yonder—Squire Allgrip's.'

'Damn him! I thought he wouldn't spare her!' cried Rickson. 'And where has she been all these months—the year and more she's been away?'

Will was himself ignorant of this part of her story, and therefore could give the farmer no information. He could only tell him the circumstances under which he had met Rachael on the common, and stood between her and the suicide to which her misery was driving her.

'No doubt she's been in London in search of help from the blackguard who's been the ruin of her—and no doubt he's refused to have anything more to do with her, the cowardly hound!' cried Rickson.

'She won't want help from anybody long, I fear,' said Will.

'Poor fool, poor fool! As comely and as good a girl as any in this part of the country, till that low-born gingerbread-faced young villain with his damned London cajoleries played

the devil with her! I wonder you didn't knock his brains out that time when he threatened you with his gold-headed hunting-crop, Will. By the Lord, I think you'd 'a done a good thing!'

Rickson was a passionate man — easily moved, both for good or for harm. The tyranny with which he felt he had been treated by Marten Allgrip rankled in his mind, and it would have been an evil hour for the squire if he had at any time found himself in personal contention with the rough-speaking farmer. In proportion to the liveliness of his antipathy for Marten Allgrip was his compassion for that young reprobate's victim.

'Now tell me,' he said, after relieving himself by this outburst of ire, 'what do you want me to do for you, or for this poor girl?'

As well as he could tell the circumstances of his position, Will told them, explaining the special difficulty in which he was placed with regard to the care of the child, in consequence of the desertion of Mrs. Withers.

'And you want some one to take charge of it till Rachael is able again to see to it herself?'

'If you could help me to do this, sir, in such a way as to keep the child out of the village—'

'I don't see how I can do it,' replied Rickson with a puzzled air; 'you can't turn in a child among a farrow o' new-born pigs, or put it under a brooding turkey, or the thing would be easy enough.'

'I was thinking that Mrs. Rickson—if you wouldn't mind speaking to her—might—'

'Of course, she knows all about children—there's a kitchen full of 'em sitting down to breakfast at this moment. You wait here. I'll have a talk with her about what's to be done.'

Rickson hurried away; sent his numerous olive-branches out of the kitchen on various pretexts, and then informed his wife of Will's somewhat extraordinary petition.

Mrs. Rickson was one of those wonderfully disposed women on whom nature has set the stamp of 'mother'—who are, who can be,

nothing but mothers. She was a bright-faced, plump little woman, looking as happy and innocent as the baby sleeping on her lap.

'It's an odd affair,' she said when her husband had stated Will's case to her, 'and I don't see what we can do in it. Did you look at the baby to see what it was like?'

'Why, what on earth should it be like but a baby?' he asked, with a hearty laugh.

'Sam Rickson, after seeing as many babies as you've seen, you ought to be ashamed to speak of one in that way; as if there was no difference in any of them; as if my Katie here—' she stooped and printed a soft doting kiss on the downy forehead of her sleeping last-born as she spoke—'wasn't prettier than any baby *you* ever set eyes on before!'

'She's the sleepiest young shaver I ever before set eyes on—but that's a blessing to her mother, I should fancy.'

'Sleep and beauty go together in babies,' said Mrs. Rickson; 'she'll be the flower of the flock, Sam—and that's saying a good deal, *I* think.'

'If they only turn out as good as they're good-looking, they'll do,' replied her husband. 'But, old lady, we're forgetting poor Will.'

'And the poor little thing he's holding in his arms—and it's not half enough covered up from the chill morning air, I'll be bound. Well, as the children are all out of the way, I think you'd better bring him in by the back-door; and when I see what sort of child it is, I may be able to think of something to be done for it, poor little innocent.'

Rickson went back to Will, and brought him into the presence of motherly Mrs. Rickson, who, the moment she set eyes on the baby in his arms discovered that her apprehensions on the subject of insufficient clothing were fully justified. The next moment it was transferred to her arms, and she was treating it as tenderly as if it had been her own.

Then the whole matter was discussed, and the conclusion arrived at was that Mrs. Rickson — inventing what excuses she could to

disarm the curiosity of the children—should keep Rachael's child until its mother was once more able to bestow upon it a mother's care.

Tendering to the farmer and his kind-hearted wife such grateful thanks as he could find words to express, Will hastened back to his cottage.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. WITHERS SETS DARK SUSPICIONS AFOOT.

Will got back to his cottage without meeting any one; for it was still so early in the day that, though the labourers were afield, the village was hardly yet astir.

But though the day was scarcely begun, Mrs. Withers had already found listeners for the story she had to tell; and before noon Rachael's return would be known from end to end of Abbot's-Nook. Condemned she was sure to be, though there was not another woman in the whole village who, left to her own instincts, would be likely to take so stern a view of her duty as had been taken by Mrs. Withers.

Strange and wholly unreasonable as the idea was, the worst feature of the scandal was held to be Will's harbouring the unfortunate

girl under his own roof, the proceeding being held to be nothing less than in open defiance of propriety; for Mrs. Withers, never for a moment doubting as to the nature of the relations between Rachael and her protector, did not hesitate to denounce it as scandalous and wicked in the last degree.

Up to this time no one had ever had a word to say against Will's character. He was popular in the village; the women liked him, and the men ungrudgingly bore witness to his excellent qualities as a farm-labourer and as a companion. But, for the moment at all events, these old impressions were of little service to him against the stress of the newly-sprung objection.

He entered his cottage quietly by the back-door, for fear of waking Rachael if she still slept; but his caution was needless. Rachael was awake; and in a voice of alarm called to him almost before he had set foot within doors.

Hurrying into the room where she was lying, he found her half raised upon the bed,

and turning upon him a look of terror and inquiry.

'My child! O, Will, what have you done with my child?' she cried.

'Don't trouble about him, Rachael; I've taken him where he'll be well provided for.'

'Not—you haven't, Will—you haven't taken my child to—to him?'

'No; not likely.'

'But, if not to him, to whom, then?'

'Don't ask me.'

'Not ask you?'

'No.'

Her look of terror was still bent upon him, and grew in intensity.

'Will, Will,' she cried, 'tell me you have not done any harm to my child!'

'Harm! what do you mean?'

She burst into a wild passion of tears that choked her speech. Will attempted to soothe her, and to induce her to lie down again in her bed; but she seized his hand, and held it half frantically, as if she were afraid he would escape from her grasp.

'Rachael, my girl, if only for my sake, try and calm yourself,' he said kindly. 'I'll do all I can for you, but that all is little enough; and there are few that I can look to for help when I can do no more for you. You've no cause to take on about your child; you've only got to think about getting strong enough to take care of yourself.'

Still clutching his hand, she looked again inquiringly into his face.

'God help and God forgive me!' she sobbed.

He tried to release his hand from her convulsive clutch.

'You must not go! you must not leave me till you have told me what you have done with my child!' she almost shrieked.

Will started; a tremor ran through his frame, and a cold perspiration burst out upon his forehead.

'I know now what you mean,' he cried; 'and you might well say God forgive you. What could have put such a horrible thought as that into your head?'

'Tell me, swear to me, Will, dear Will, that you have not harmed my poor child!'

'Shame on you, Rachael! you have not spared me often when you might; but this is the worst wrong you ever did me. Yes, God forgive you!'

He firmly disengaged his hand, and was passing from her bedside into the kitchen; but the wild tone of entreaty in which she called on him not to leave her made him pause.

'Hear me, Will,' she cried; 'God is my witness that the idea of your harming my child would never have come into my mind! There have been people here; Mrs. Withers told them of my child, and when they found that it was gone—'

'I see,' he replied bitterly; 'and so they think me capable of murdering a helpless infant! Let them. To you, Rachael, I will only say that your child is in the care of a kind friend, who will tend it till you are well enough to do a mother's duty by it. Say no more; but nurse yourself, and get about again

as quickly as you can, for the sake of all of us. *You* do not think I am deceiving you?'

'I trust your word, Will, with all my soul. O, do not learn to hate me! I seem born to injure you, by word and deed; you, the only human being on this earth to whom I can look for act or word of kindness!'

'Get well; that's all I ask of you now,' replied Will, retiring into the kitchen, where he quietly prepared breakfast for himself and his unfortunate guest.

While he was thus engaged, a very different scene was being enacted in another part of the village.

As Rachael had told Will, people had been to his cottage during the time he was absent on his mission to Farmer Rickson's. Mrs. Withers had related the events of the past night to the gossips of the village, some of whom, under pretence of offering assistance to Will, had intruded upon Rachael, whose vague answers relative to her child had awakened the darkest suspicions in the mind of Mrs. Withers when they were conveyed back to her.

It was nothing to that good woman that for years she had witnessed in Will's character constant and unquestionable evidences of kindness and rectitude. The intelligence was hardly conveyed to her that Rachael's child was missing, before she had expressed her conviction that it had been put out of the way by foul means. Instead of pursuing her journey to a distant village, where she had relatives, as she had announced her intention of doing, she lingered in Abbot's-Nook, spreading the horrible impression received by her own mind.

For two days not a soul visited Will's cottage; and during that time no one offered to address him on the subject of Rachael or her child. He was very little abroad, indeed; employing himself on a small piece of land which he rented with his cottage, when he was not in attendance on Rachael. Knowing the dark suspicion which some, at least, of the people in the village harboured against him, he kept as much as possible out of the way of meeting them. That any serious consequences could follow, never for an instant occurred to him.

By the evening of the second day, however, the subject of the disappearance, as the event was called, of Rachael's child, together with the grave imputations made current by the lips of Mrs. Withers, had engaged the attention of the conclave of the Red Lion.

In a body like that of the *quorum*, it is in the very nature of things that the individuals composing it should take special interest in special subjects. The riding of hobbies is not an unheard-of practice even in bodies supposed to represent the wisdom of nations; it is therefore not wonderful that, in the little coterie which nightly assembled in the parlour of the Red Lion at Abbot's-Nook there was hobby-riding, sometimes fast and furious. As a rule, the furiousness of the riding was more or less in exact proportion to the quantity of spirituous liquors consumed by the riders. On the present occasion, several hobbies — particularly that of Mr. Gattens, in respect of the moral and political expediency of establishing a prohibitory tariff against the importation of foreign spirits, and of articles of

foreign manufacture generally — had been ridden with infinite spirit and persistency, and, it may be safely assumed, with copious imbibition of strong drinks.

No subject, however, had taken such complete hold on the attention of the *quorum*—led by Mr. Sifter, as obviously representing the law and its powers—as that of the suggested murder of Rachael's infant child.

It was Mr. Sifter's great occasion; and Mr. Sifter was not the man, he justly flattered himself, to let that great occasion slip. The field, in fact, was given up to him, and for a long time he 'made the running' as he liked. If not on legal ground, where could he be expected to shine?

Shine! Mr. Sifter was that night perfectly dazzling in the eyes of the *quorum;* that is to say, in as many of them as were capable of seeing anything with tolerable distinctness.

With a readiness of observation and decision of purpose highly creditable to his intellect and professional acumen, he fixed his

attention firmly on Mr. Squills, as the person able to give evidence on a point of primary interest in the case. His whole manner implied that from the elucidation of that point nothing should turn him.

Under Mr. Sifter's examination Mr. Squills was anything but comfortable. He was peppery at the best of times, and the present was certainly not one of these. The moral attitude taken by Mr. Sifter irritated Mr. Squills unduly perhaps. That the shoe pinches him that wears it, is well known, however; and pleasant as the exercise in which he was indulging might be to Mr. Sifter, to Mr. Squills, after awhile, it became as annoying as the sting of east wind might have been to his unprotected ears, or the rattle of a hail-shower on the pink top of his partially bald cranium.

'Look here, Sifter,' he cried at length, after enduring a long interrogatory, in the course of which Mr. Sifter had badgered him, as if he, Sifter, had been counsel for the prosecution turning inside out a crafty witness

for the defence. 'Look here, Sifter, I'll be hanged if I am going to be made to say anything you like in this way. I've nothing to do with either the confounded girl or her more confounded child!'

'I beg your pardon, Squills!' replied the lawyer, stirring his gin-and-water vigorously —'I beg your pardon; but you *have*. However, the point I am trying to come at is this: do I, or do I not—mark me, *that* is the point—do I, or do I not, understand you distinctly to affirm that there *was* a child in the man Woodruff's cottage? I don't wish to hurt your feelings as a man and as a neighbour, Squills; but I am bound to tell you, in my professional capacity, that I attach the gravest importance to your answer to that simple question.'

Several members of the *quorum* nodded to each other significantly, and said, 'Hear, hear!' before raising their glasses to their lips.

Mr. Squills looked very red as he replied pettishly:

'I don't know what right you have to question me in your professional capacity at all, Mr. Sifter; it isn't clear to me that you *have* any professional capacity, but if you have, I should say you'd better keep it for the benefit of your clients!'

'Hear, hear!' cried Mr. Gattens, in a tipsy tone of voice. Then breaking into tipsier song, he added:

'We'll fight while we can; when we can't, boys, we'll run!'

'What Mr. Gattens may elect to do under any circumstances, is entirely immaterial to me, and to every gentleman in this room, I imagine,' retorted Mr. Sifter loftily.

'Sifter, your liquor's disagreed with you, old boy!' cried Mr. Gattens irreverently.

'Gattens, take a friend's advice, go home to bed, and do not expose yourself to the contempt of gentlemen, not only intellectually your superiors, but sober!'

Of all exasperating things that can be said to a half-tipsy man there is nothing so instantly incisive as the suggestion that he is

under the influence of the drink he has been imbibing. Mr. Sifter's suggestion of tipsiness acted like a spark thrown upon gunpowder; the offensive word was hardly spoken before Mr. Gattens exploded.

'Sober, sir! what do you mean by sober?' he cried fiercely.

'It's not at all surprising that you are at present in doubt on the subject,' answered Mr. Sifter smartly.

'There's one thing of which I'm not at all in doubt, Sifter,' retorted Mr. Gattens.

'That *does* somewhat surprise me,' replied Mr. Sifter.

'Perhaps it won't so much surprise you when you hear what it is.'

'Possibly. What may be the subject on which, at this particular moment, Mr. Gattens is not at all in doubt?'

'That you're a pompous pettifogging little humbug!' exclaimed Mr. Gattens, rising from his chair with a threatening gesture, as if he intended to follow up the extremely derogatory remark to which he had given

utterance by an even more derogatory attack upon Mr. Sifter's person.

Several members of the *quorum* laid hands on him, however, and forced him to return to his seat.

'I'm sorry you should have taken the trouble to prevent the carrying out of this absurd person's demonstrations,' said Mr. Sifter, when he saw that Mr. Gattens did not attempt to regain his legs. 'I assure you, I should have found the power of the law abundantly sufficient protection from their consequences.'

'That for the law!' cried Mr. Gattens, snapping his fingers; 'and that for its petti-fogging practitioner!'

Loud cries of 'Order!' drowned the end of the altercation; and after a time the *quorum* returned to a farther consideration of the subject from which it had been so unpleasantly diverted.

'As a lawyer, no less than as—I hope I may confidently say—an inhabitant of this place, who has never lost an opportunity, as

far as his poor ability permitted, to serve the best interests of his neighbours,' said Mr. Sifter, as if he were addressing the jury on the whole case, 'I feel bound to inform Mr. Squills—for whom I have always, in public and in private, felt and expressed the highest respect, not only as a medical authority, but as a gentleman—I feel bound to inform Mr. Squills, I say, that after what has passed this evening I feel it to be my duty to take such steps as will at once elucidate the mystery of the disappearance of the woman Rachael Summer's child, and possibly bring to immediate justice the perpetrator of a crime the bare suspicion of which casts a blight upon the moral and physical aspect of Abbot's-Nook!'

Never, perhaps, had so brilliant a feat of oratory been achieved by a member of the *quorum*. Proudly did Mr. Sifter finish at a draught the remainder of his gin-and-water.

Mr. Squills was fairly taken aback by the unlooked-for burst of eloquence of which,

heartily against his will, he was made the recipient. The perspiration actually stood in shining beads upon the crown of his head while he was debating within himself what to say or do under the circumstances. At last, recovering somewhat from the flurry into which he had been thrown, he rose from his chair, and took his hat from the peg on which it hung behind him.

'What the deuce you are going to do, Sifter,' he replied, 'I neither know nor care; but I'll be hanged if I stay any longer to be badgered and worried about a matter with which I've no concern. As to the fellow Woodruff making away with the infant of that poor devil of a girl — stuff and nonsense!'

'Excuse me — that's a question not so easily determined,' said Mr. Sifter.

'Confound it, then, determine it in any other way you like!' cried Mr. Squills, clapping on his hat, and flinging out of the room without wishing any one 'good-night.'

There were a few moments of silence;

and then the landlord gravely put down his pipe, and appeared as if about to address the *quorum;* but after looking upon the sanded floor for a brief space, he took up his pipe and recommenced smoking, without delivering himself of any remark whatever.

'Sifter, you old fool!' cried Mr. Gattens in a chirruppy tone of voice, 'you've sent Squills home in a state of mind that will be felt for months to come in all the physic he sends out; and, hang you! what's worse, you've spoiled the harmony of the evening. Gentlemen, I propose that Sifter gives us a song, or pays for glasses round. What do you say, Sifter?'

'I say, Gattens, that I'll not be a party to any arrangement that leads to—to—to Mrs. Gattens having the right to object to the entertainment furnished to her husband from the stores of the Red Lion.'

The *quorum* was in a fair way to get back its good temper. The laugh that followed Mr. Sifter's equally politic and judicious remark was repeated again and again,

until the time came at which the convives were used to separate. Mr. Gattens *did* take one more glass; but the effect upon him was not such as Mrs. Gattens could seriously reprove.

Nearly the last guests to leave the Red Lion were Mr. Gattens and Mr. Sifter, who shook hands at parting as if nothing had ever occurred to throw even a momentary shadow across the bright path of their friendliness.

'At ten o'clock to-morrow,' said Mr. Sifter, as he placed his latch-key in the door of his house, 'I shall make it my business to apply to Sir Spencer Shelford, the nearest magistrate, for a warrant to apprehend this fellow Woodruff, unless the missing infant is in the mean time forthcoming. This is the course I shall pursue, let Squills like it or not like it.'

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. SIFTER IS QUITE 'AS GOOD AS HIS WORD.'

MORNING is said to bring reflection: it at least brought early to Mr. Sifter's mind a vivid recollection of the over-night's proceedings of the *quorum*. The act of shaving, too, has a concentrating influence on the mind; and between the laying-on of the lather, and the final rendering to his chin of a smoothness calculated to satisfy the utmost exaction of respectability, Mr. Sifter was able to consider matters in a somewhat more purely practical spirit than the circumstances of the previous night had permitted. It now appeared clear to him that he had been a little hasty, a little premature; and if business had been brisk with him at that time, he would have felt not altogether disinclined to find in its demands a presentable excuse

for not carrying out literally the intention he had so publicly and emphatically expressed.

But however strongly inclined he might have been to back out of the position he had taken on the subject of the missing child, events were occurring which, so to speak, effectually cut off his retreat.

Not only in the parlour of the Red Lion, but in the kitchen of the Plough, had the state of affairs at Will's cottage been the subject of discussion and of violently divided opinion. The strongest believers in the charge against Will were, naturally, the husbands of the women who had gone to the cottage, and found both him and the child mysteriously absent, the manifest terror of Rachael on being questioned having been at once taken as proof of a guilty knowledge of guilty intention on the part of Will. That such a man would be, in the last degree, unlikely to commit a crime so utterly barbarous, occurred to the minds of hardly one of the disputants.

'Well, darn me if this don't come over me more nor anything as ever happened in Abbot's-Nook as I've heard tell of,' remarked one of those least ill-disposed towards him. 'I'd a trusted any child o' mine wi' him as I would wi' its own mother. But he's been a-going wrong ever since Sam Rickson turned him off for insulting young Squire Allgrip.'

'Will Woodruff's a sort you never know anything about till he does a something you don't look for him to do. Give me a man as says what he thinks, let who will like what he says; and that's just what you never found *him* a-doing.'

'It's your silent pig as eats up all the wash,' remarked another.

'Well, I'm darn'd if he won't ha' to speak out now to some tune, if he wants to slip his neck out o' the haltar,' said the second speaker.

'That he will, if there's any law in this here country,' said another.

'What I can't make out is,' said the man who had first spoken, 'why *he* come to do it.

If *she'd* a-done it, I shouldn't 'a been surprised; she wouldn't 'a been the first, by a many.'

'Why, the reason it wasn't her as did it was because she couldn't. When my old 'oman saw her lying on the bed, she thought as she might 'a been shamming; but she hadn't no more strength then a kitten, and couldn't 'a stood if you'd give her ten pound to get upon her feet.'

'That may be; but I'm darn'd if anything 'll make me believe as she didn't know well enough where Will was gone to wi' her child, when my wife taxed her about it,' remarked another.

'Old mother Withers is ready to swear that when she left the cottage the child was asleep in the up-stairs room, and Will in the back 'us.'

'That shows clear enough, then, that as it couldn't 'a been her as did it, it *must* 'a been him.'

'He'll be darn'd clever to get over *that*,' cried one.

'That he will,' cried another. 'I al'ays thought as he was soft-headed.'

'No, I'm darn'd if he ever was that,' cried the first speaker vigorously. 'It was al'ays "still waters runs deep" wi' Will Woodruff; and I've knowd him since he was a boy. How he come to do the thing in such a ninny-hammerish way, reg'larly knocks me over. Why, it's as if he'd said to himself, "What shall I do to get myself hanged?"'

'Well, here's hopin' as he may get his deserts,' said a rough-looking fellow named Easby, raising a mug of ale to his lips. 'If he'd 'a knocked the brains out o' one o' Squire Allgrip's infernal keepers, I'd 'a forgive him, an' kept his secret; but I'm darn'd if I ever forgive him for stoppin' the breath of a little child, and so I shall tell him if I come across him before constable Edglin lays hands on him.'

This announcement of Mr. Easby's, by giving expression to a feeling general amongst those present, was warmly received and loudly echoed.

Unfortunately for himself, he 'came across' Will early the next morning, as he was going to his work. The meeting took place near Will's cottage, towards which Will was returning with a can of milk, given him by Mrs. Rickson for Rachael.

Will looked haggard and gloomy, and would have passed Easby without speaking, but the other stopped short before him, muttering to himself,

'Looks as if the halter was already about his throat, darn'd if he don't! Nobody don't need to look at *him* twice to see the shadow of the gallows in his face!'

'Do you want anything?' inquired Will.

'I don't want anything of you; but I want to say something to you, Will Woodruff.'

The tone of the man's voice was too marked not to cause Will to notice it; the manner of the man was also obviously aggressive. Will looked at him inquiringly for nearly a minute before making any reply.

'I don't understand you, Tom Easby,' he said; 'say what you have to say to me, and say it so that I may understand what you mean.'

'I intend to,' replied Easby. 'Do you know what's being said of you yonder—in Abbot's-Nook?'

'I neither know nor care.'

'I can see, by the whiteness of your face, that's a lie,' cried Easby.

Will's face had been, as the other said, white; but it flashed red as fire now. He set down his can of milk, and then placed himself within arm's reach of Easby.

'Tom Easby,' he said, restraining his anger as well as he could, 'I know you for a poacher—for one as wouldn't stand nice about taking the life of a gamekeeper if you was hard driven; but I'm not a keeper.'

'No, or the gallows wouldn't be waiting for you at this moment,' cried Easby.

'What do you mean? Speak plain, man, or, by God, you'll drive me to do you a mischief!'

'O, I'm not afraid,' replied Easby; 'you'll not find it quite so easy to murder me as you did Rachael Summer's baby!'

Will staggered as if he had been struck by a bullet, and for the space of half-a-minute all his faculties appeared to be paralysed. But his senses returned to him as suddenly as they had deserted him, and he sprang face to face with his tormenter.

'Who has set you on to say this, you black-hearted scoundrel?' he cried.

'I don't wait to be set on by anyone, when I've made up my mind about anything, as I have about you,' replied Easby.

'As there's a sky above us, Tom Easby, you'll unsay those horrible words!'

'Unsay 'em? If I don't repeat 'em till I've proved 'em on you in the felon's dock, may my tongue wither!' was Easby's answer.

Before the sound of his voice was out of his own ears he was lying prostrate on the road, felled by a tremendous blow dealt him between the eyes by Will, now carried away by an ungovernable outburst of rage.

Easby was a bold man, and, though for a moment stunned, was quickly on his feet and prepared to defend himself. But Will's onslaught was irresistible, and again and again Easby was knocked down, the last blow leaving him insensible where he fell. Too savage to care what might become of his conquered antagonist, Will left him, and hurried to his own cottage.

He had not escaped punishment; and though he tried while tending on Rachael to conceal from her the disturbance of mind with which he was still struggling, a bruise upon his forehead and a deep graze upon one of his cheeks immediately caught her eyes, and led her to question him as to what had happened to him.

The injuries were slight, and he himself had been unconscious of them; but since Rachael had noticed them he could not ignore them, and by so doing avoid the necessity for telling her of the encounter he had been engaged in. His eyes were opened, too, to the fact that the dark reports spread by

Mrs. Withers might entail more serious consequences than he had hitherto thought it possible for them to do.

As his passion cooled, the thought presented itself to his mind that he might unintentionally have done to Easby some grievous harm—killed him perhaps; and he became alive to the necessity of being prepared for whatever might happen. One thing he determined to do at once; this was to inform Rachael where her child was, after duly impressing upon her the reasons which made it undesirable for Mr. Rickson's name to be mixed up in their affairs.

A sort of presentiment that his troubles would soon be intensified hung upon his spirit.

Returning to consciousness after a time, the injured man Easby staggered back to his home, where his battered appearance filled his family first with terror and next with unbounded indignation. The story of his encounter with Will was spread rapidly

through the village, and at length reached the ears of Mr. Sifter in a highly concentrated form.

Boldly accused by Tom Easby of the murder of Rachael's child—so the story ran in the latest rendering of it—Will had attempted to escape, and on being seized by Easby, had savagely attacked his accuser and would-be captor, and endeavoured to murder him.

After hearing this, it hardly needed the clamorous appeal of Mrs. Easby to induce Mr. Sifter to move at once in the matter. He lost no time in proceeding to the residence of Sir Spencer Shelford, who made no difficulty about granting a warrant for Will's apprehension on the charge of attempting the life of Thomas Easby; the which warrant was immediately placed in the hands of the sworn constable of Abbot's-Nook for execution.

Sir Spencer Shelford was a very old and very deaf gentleman, a county magnate on the strength of his landed possessions; but it could hardly have been for any or all of these qualities that he had been intrusted with

magisterial power. He made no difficulty about signing a warrant for Will's apprehension, as has been said; but it is worth remarking that his clerk had very great difficulty, first in making him understand that the application made to him had no reference to the legal formality of affiliating Rachael's infant; and next that Will was not charged with murdering any of the gamekeepers on his, Sir Spencer's, estate. Satisfied at length that a warrant was wanted for some purpose due and proper, he appended his signature, at the instigation of his clerk, as a matter of course—as one of the high duties of a county magnate, in fact.

The warrant was quickly served.

When the constable reached Will's cottage, he found him supporting Rachael in bed while she partook of a basin of broth which he had contrived to make for her. The man was touched by the sight, and, instead of instantly securing his prisoner, waited till Will came out of the cottage, in answer to a sign which he made to him. Without surprise Will

heard that he must consider himself in custody.

'I expected it,' he said, 'and for myself I care nothing; but the poor girl in there—what is to become of her? She hasn't a friend but me in this place—nor in all the rest of the world, I doubt. She's too ill to attend upon herself, an' if she's left—she's left on her death-bed.'

'Will!' cried Rachael faintly from within the cottage.

'She's callin' me,' said Will.

'I can't let you out of my sight, Woodruff—it 'ud be more than my place is worth to do it,' replied the constable regretfully.

'I won't attempt to escape, I swear,' cried Will.

'Don't ask me—it can't be done, or I'd do it, Woodruff, as I'm a man.'

'Will, Will!' cried Rachael anxiously.

'I must speak to her—I must tell her—I'll not set foot within the door, trust me!' cried Will pleadingly.

'Speak to her, then,' replied the constable.

Will opened the door, but did not attempt to cross the threshold.

'Rachael, my poor girl,' he said, 'you must bear up as well as you can; I'm going away from you—for a time.'

'Going away from me? Going? My God, Will, what does this mean?' cried Rachael, raising herself in her bed, and speaking with the vehemence of terror. 'They are *taking* you away! The man now waiting for you is Edglin, the constable! What have you done?—what have you done?'

'Don't give way in this manner, my girl. What I have done is what—if I had had my wits about me—I should not have done, for your sake; I gave a thrashing to a scoundrel, and the white-livered liar accuses me of trying to murder him; as if I could not have knocked his dull brains out if I had had a mind to!'

'But who—who was it, Will?'

'Easby—Tom Easby—whom I have known ever since I was a child, and never had an angry word with till this morning.'

'And what did you have words about this morning, Will?'

'The blackguard accused me of—well, it doesn't matter. The drubbing I gave him he well deserved, though it would have been better if I'd kept my temper, and let him say his lying say.'

'Tell me what he said, Will. Was it about me?' cried Rachael.

'Never mind what he said,' replied Will half doggedly.

'Well, if he won't tell you, I will,' said the constable, who had listened attentively to all that had been said; 'he said what has been freely said by many in the village—though 'pon my soul I don't believe it's true—that Woodruff has made away with your child; that's what he said.'

The remembrance of her own wild suspicions smote Rachael heavily on the heart, and she burst into a frantic passion of tears before she could make any reply to the constable's explanation.

'Many say that in the village, do they?' asked Will sadly.

'They do, Woodruff, and that's the truth,' replied the constable.

'They'll know better, some time or other,' was Will's rejoinder.

'The sooner the better, then,' suggested the constable; 'for this charge of Easby's isn't all you'll have to answer for, Woodruff, take my word for it. I tell you this as a friend, because I've known you all your life, and—and, damme, Woodruff, I believe it isn't in you to kill a man in cold blood—much less a little helpless infant!'

'God bless you, Mr. Edglin, for saying that of the best and kindest man in Abbot's-Nook,' cried Rachael. "Tell all who think ill of him that, only for his goodness, I and my child would now be both lost and dead! He kill my child! tell them that it is by his doing my child is at this moment living and well cared for by kind hands! tell them—'

'Hush! Remember — remember!' cried Will, alarmed lest, in her excitement, she should reveal the place of the child's concealment. 'The child's in good hands,' he said

to the constable; 'I've done the best I could for it; but I can do nothing more for its mother, who wants as much or more care. It's hard I must be taken from her.'

'It *is* hard,' said the constable; 'but, you see, I can't help doing my duty. But as to this poor girl—look here, Woodruff, I'll promise you I'll try what I can do with my old woman, and perhaps she'll lend a helping hand; she's not a bad sort, though I say it of her. You keep up your spirits, Rachael; the point about the child being made clear, the worst can't be very bad, if the magistrate can only be made to hear some part of the case and understand the bearing of the rest. So I say, meaning it, you keep up your spirits, my girl.'

The parting between Rachael and Will was very brief; and the last words were spoken by the kindly-disposed constable, who, as he closed the cottage door and led Will away to the village 'lock-up,' repeated his advice to Rachael to keep up her spirits.

CHAPTER XV.

JUSTICES' JUSTICE.

After about an hour's detention in the 'lock-up,' Will was carried before Sir Spencer Shelford, the room in which that magnate sat to dispense justice being densely crowded by the villagers and leading people of Abbot's-Nook, who all seemed to take a special interest in the case about to be heard.

Mr. Sifter appeared on behalf of the man Easby, who, with his head enveloped in bandages, was a conspicuous figure in the assemblage, and told his story a dozen times to a dozen different knots of listeners, while his wife sat in her Sunday clothes at the receipt of condolences outpoured with unstinting liberality.

Will having at length been placed at the bar, Mr. Sifter in a neat speech informed his

worship—or rather, attempted to inform him—of the nature of the case brought before him; a case which he felt it his duty to designate as one of the darkest nature; a case which he was determined, in the ends of justice, to sift to the bottom, to reveal its tortuous and innermost recesses of iniquity to the open light of day, without fear or favour, preconception or prejudice, but guided only by that sacred instinct of right and truth which all honest men clung to as the safety-anchor of their personal freedom and security. They had the proud, he would say the noble, privilege of living in a land where the law was gentle as the unshorn lamb to all who kept within its pale, but terrible as the lion of the desert to whoever set it at defiance. And on that law, so gentle and yet so terrible, he now called with confidence—a confidence built on an adamantine foundation—the experience of countless ages! And never within his recollection—he would venture to say, never within the recollection of his worship—

'I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Mr. Sifter,' said Sir Spencer Shelford, 'but I didn't quite catch that last remark.'

The clerk rose and explained in Sir Spencer's ear.

'O, yes, exactly,' said Sir Spencer; 'I thought that was what he meant. I don't wish, Mr. Sifter, to curtail any remarks you may feel disposed to make in behalf of the accused—'

Again the clerk rose and explained to his chief the little mistake he was making.

'Quite so,' replied Sir Spencer—'quite so; I was coming to that. Of course, Mr. Sifter, I shall feel happy to hear anything you may have to say for your client; but it may save you some trouble and myself some time, if I tell you that as the case stands I have no doubt that it will be my duty to— Eh, what do you say, Mr. Twiner?'

Mr. Twiner was his worship's clerk, who had once more sprung to his feet and addressed himself to the difficult task of keeping his worship from going wrong.

'Very well, in that case,' replied Sir Spencer blandly, 'I'll hear the evidence as to character before committing the fellow to prison for trial.'

'With very great respect for the court,' said Mr. Sifter, 'it *does* appear to me that there is here something irregular.'

'If you'll just have a moment's patience, you'll find everything perfectly regular,' said Mr. Twiner sharply. 'Constable, produce the prosecutor, and swear him.'

Easby moved forward and took the place assigned to him, casting a dark look towards Will as he came in sight of him.

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Twiner,' said Mr. Sifter, 'but I had not completed the few observations which I had intended to address to his worship, and which—with due respect for the authority of the officers of this court—I must claim the privilege of continuing.'

'If you'd proceed with the case, you'd be doing something worth while,' replied Mr. Twiner tartly.

'Allow me to remind you that I am here

in the discharge of a grave, onerous, and public duty,' cried Mr. Sifter warmly.

'And allow me to remind you that I have public duties to perform, and to tell you that I mean to perform 'em!' retorted Mr. Twiner.

'The prisoner denies the charge, does he?' demanded Sir Spencer; 'in that case, perhaps he prefers going before a jury.'

Mr. Twiner explained to his worship.

'O, indeed,' replied Sir Spencer; 'if I had had any idea that my indulgence would have been so misused, I should certainly not have consented to listen to any address whatsoever from the lips of Mr. Sifter.'

'I assure your worship——' cried Mr. Sifter.

'Very well, very well. There let the matter drop. I accept your apology, and believe that you had no real intention to insult the bench. I'm bound to say I never knew you to do so on any other occasion, Mr. Sifter.'

'Pray make his worship understand that

nothing I said warrants such a construction,' cried Mr. Sifter appealingly to Mr. Twiner.

'Pray let the case go on,' replied that gentleman snappishly; 'we sha'n't get done to-day else. Swear the prosecutor, constable.'

Under protest from Mr. Sifter, the oath was administered to Easby, who, on being called on to tell his story, told it firmly and without attempting to exaggerate the actual occurrences of his meeting and subsequent contest with Will.

Mr. Sifter, who had heard the story in its latest and most embellished form, was not a little puzzled by the manifest discrepancies of the two versions. He felt the case slipping through his fingers, as it were, and the prospect of entirely losing his hold was not at all pleasant, after the public and gratuitous manner in which he had taken up the matter.

Easby had shrunk from repeating the accusation which had called up Will's wrath, and this was the very point which Mr. Sifter had pledged himself to bring under the cognisance of justice.

'Before this good man stands down,' said Mr. Sifter, 'I will, with your worship's permission, put certain questions to him, the answers to which, I have reason to believe, will put an entirely new complexion on the case as it has now been presented to your worship.'

'What does he say?' demanded Sir Spencer of Mr. Twiner; 'what does he say—he denies my jurisdiction?'

Mr. Twiner had some little trouble to persuade his worship that his authority was not for a moment called in question.

'I should be very sorry to think that any one in Mr. Sifter's position should be of opinion that, after acting as a magistrate of this county for twenty-seven years, I am still unable to determine for myself the proper limits of my magisterial authority; I will undertake to say that no such imputation was ever before made.'

Sir Spencer spoke with the air of a man whose moral sensibility has been deeply hurt, and Mr. Twiner, who knew by long ex-

perience the best way to manage him, let him talk himself quiet without farther attempting to undeceive him.

'Now,' said Mr. Twiner, turning to Easby, 'did anybody see what took place between you and the accused man?'

'I beg your pardon,' interrupted Mr. Sifter; 'I was about to ask the complainant a series of questions—'

'Very possibly; and to make several speeches, if his worship would allow you,' replied Mr. Twiner; 'but the case can, I am quite sure, go on without the valuable assistance you are so ready to waste upon it. The complainant has made his charge, has no witness to call; that he has received some injury we can all see for ourselves, I suppose; we don't need half a day's questioning to come at those facts. *The* question now is—what has the accused to say in answer to the charge brought against him?'

'Sir—Mr. Twiner—in the whole course of my experience—' cried Mr. Sifter.

'*Your* experience!' muttered Mr. Twiner contemptuously.

'I appeal to his worship for protection!' exclaimed Mr. Sifter, raising his voice.

'What does Mr. Sifter say?' demanded Sir Spencer; 'all the complainant requires is protection? Very well; we can easily give him that. We'll bind the accused over in two sureties for six months, to keep the peace towards him and all other of his Majesty's subjects. And—speaking my own mind—I've not the least doubt that there was six of one and half a dozen of the other; and if men will go to fisticuffs, of course they must expect to get hard knocks. There's no other case, I think, Mr. Twiner?'

Mr. Twiner almost savagely sprang to his feet and conveyed to Sir Spencer's mind the necessary correction of the error in which he had so completely lost his way.

'Is that really so?' cried Sir Spencer. 'What does Mr. Sifter mean, then, by so misleading me? This is very annoying—very, Mr. Sifter! and I must positively require you

not again to interfere, if you cannot act more judiciously.'

'Now I hope you are content,' remarked Mr. Twiner.

'No, sir, I am not; and I am not to be put down, either by sneers from you, Mr. Twiner, nor by the uncalled-for reproofs from the lips of Sir Spencer Shelford!' retorted Mr. Sifter. 'Nothing will content me but a thorough and complete dragging to light of all the circumstances of this important case.'

'A case of common assault!' suggested Mr. Twiner.

'Connected, nevertheless,' replied Mr. Sifter loftily, 'with the commission of a crime of greater magnitude and darker import.'

Mr. Sifter spoke in a tone of solemnity, and looked round the room, as if asking for the approval of the persons assembled. The appeal, if such it was intended to be, was not unanswered; for a sort of hollow murmur instantly arose from the crowd, and was as instantly accepted by him as a token that he

was not alone in the matter he had taken in hand.

'I hope you are not going to be so absurd as to attempt to maintain the charge of attempted murder on which the warrant was granted?' inquired Mr. Twiner.

'I am not prepared to say what I may or what I may not attempt,' replied Mr. Sifter. 'What I am first determined to do is, to require the complainant Thomas Easby, on his oath, to state *why* he was induced to endeavour to secure the person of the man William Woodruff, on finding him in the act of making his escape from Abbot's-Nook.'

'I—I never said he was trying to escape,' replied Easby.

'However that may be,' said Mr. Sifter, 'you felt, on meeting the man at the bar, that it was your duty to take such measures as would prevent his eluding the grasp of justice; and therefore fearlessly—and, indeed, without thought of any peril you might run in the performance of what you believed to be your bounden duty—you single-handed endeavoured to effect his capture?'

'No,' said Easby; 'I didn't do anything o' that sort.'

Mr. Sifter blushed up to the roots of what little hair he had left.

'Upon my word, you're making a pretty mess of the affair!' cried Mr. Twiner in the most contemptuous tone of voice he could command. 'May I ask how much longer you propose to keep his worship listening to this sort of nonsense?'

Poor Mr. Sifter's courage had received a knock-down blow, and he was for a few moments quite at the mercy of the wholly unmerciful Mr. Twiner. Manfully plucking up heart, however, he turned with awful severity upon Easby, as the more vulnerable of his two antagonists.

'The evidence you are now giving both astonishes and shocks me,' he cried. 'Let me remind you not to forget the solemn obligation of the oath which has been administered to you.'

'It's because I haven't forgot it, I've told the truth and nothing but the truth. I never said either that the man there was trying to

escape, or that I tried to hinder him; what I said to *him* is another matter.'

'Very much so, I should fancy,' remarked Mr. Twiner; 'though very possibly, Mr. Sifter may not be able to appreciate the difference without hearing the exact words referred to. Favour him by repeating them.'

'I don't remember the exact words I used,' replied Easby, 'but the drift of 'em was this. I accused him—as all in the village have been doing—of making away with the infant child of a young woman now lying on a sick bed in his cottage.'

It was Mr. Twiner's turn to be taken aback.

'Making away! Do you mean murdering the child in question?' he demanded.

'I do,' replied Easby.

'I think you will now admit that I have had very good ground for the course I have seen fit to pursue in this case?' said Mr. Sifter.

'Do be quiet, Mr. Sifter, if you can,' was Mr. Twiner's only reply.

During the long half hour occupied by

these by no means extraordinay proceedings, Will had stood pale and silent at the bar, a dull and almost dogged expression upon his face. In the mistakes and cross-purposes of the magistrate and Mr. Sifter he had appeared to take scarcely any interest; and the only emotion he had displayed was now, at last, when Easby had spoken directly to the horrible charge which had been fixed upon him by the credulous listeners to Mrs. Withers's scandalous outpourings. He turned his eyes almost with a flash upon his late antagonist, and his lips half parted under the impulse to hurl back in his teeth the infamous suggestion of his guilt; he spoke no word, however, but waited to hear and see to what farther length his accusers would go.

'Now,' cried Mr. Twiner, 'attend wholly to me, Easby. You have spoken to a general suspicion among the villagers of this man having made away—that is to say, of having murdered—the infant child of a girl now living under his roof?'

'I have,' replied Easby firmly.

'Tell his worship all you know of this matter—all you know, of your own knowledge.'

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Twiner,' interposed Mr. Sifter, 'but in a case like the present, I must claim to direct the evidence to be given by my client; I cannot suffer him to make any general statement, the effect of which might—I say might—possibly be to incriminate himself—'

'Let me be, and mind your own business, if you please!' cried Tom Easby, flashing up angrily at the possibility so astutely suggested by Mr. Sifter. 'What I've got to say won't hurt *me*, and I'm not going to let *you* entangle me in what don't concern me. I'm ready to answer *you*, sir,' he added, turning to Mr. Twiner, who took a pinch of snuff with infinite relish in celebration of this signal discomfiture of Mr. Sifter.

'This is intolerable!' cried that gentleman, 'perfectly intolerable!'

'What are we waiting for now?' inquired

Sir Spencer Shelford abruptly, as if awaking from a light doze.

'Perhaps you will *now* permit us to proceed, after trying his worship's patience to the utmost?' remarked Mr. Twiner.

'I have nothing more to say,' said Mr. Sifter, wiping the perspiration from the top of his head; 'nothing more than this—that in the whole course of my career I have never been treated with such indignity, and that it will be for me to consider what steps I shall take to vindicate my professional character, most grossly and unjustifiably attacked in this court.'

Having to this extent relieved his overwrought feelings, Mr. Sifter hurried out of the room, and was seen no more, until he filled his accustomed seat at night in the parlour of the Red Lion; before which time the result of the inquiry before Sir Spencer Shelford had taken a turn which still farther added to the busy little lawyer's surprise and mortification.

'A very good fellow, Sifter,' said Sir

Spencer Shelford, observing Mr. Sifter's departure; 'but too fond of addressing the bench —much too fond of addressing the bench. Well, I suppose, as Sifter is not able to carry the case any farther to-day, we had better remand the accused; eh, Mr. Twiner?'

'Mr. Sifter has retired from the case altogether, Sir Spencer,' cried Mr. Twiner in the magistrate's ear.

'God bless my soul; then he sees no way of rebutting the evidence against the accused? I'm not surprised. The only thing to be done, then, is to make out the scoundrel's commitment for trial.'

Mr. Twiner, uttering an audible groan and an inaudible oath, once more set Sir Spencer Shelford right, and was about resuming the examination of the man Easby, when there was a sudden commotion at the door of the justice-room; the crowd that blocked it up moved hastily aside, and Rachael, pale as death, and bearing her child in her arms, was led forward, supported by Mrs. Withers, to the table at which Mr. Twiner was seated.

'What is the meaning of this disorderly proceeding?' cried Sir Spencer Shelford; 'what is that constable about that he allows the court to be interrupted in this most reprehensible manner?'

'Good God! what now?' cried Mr. Twiner, in a tone almost of despair. 'Who are you, women; and what do you want?' he demanded savagely of Rachael and her companion, who, scarcely less pale than the death-stricken woman she was supporting, replied tremblingly,

'We've come — and, O, may the Lord be praised, *I've* come! — to prove *his* innocence of the crime I blindly and wickedly thought him guilty of! O, Will Woodruff, I'm an old woman; let me hear you say you forgive me; forgive me, or how can I hope for mercy beyond the grave!'

Will hardly heard her words; his whole attention was concentrated on Rachael, who appeared unable to speak, indeed scarcely conscious of herself or her surroundings.

'Rachael, Rachael, my poor girl! you have

killed yourself to save me!' cried Will in a tone of anguish.

She heard his voice and turned towards him with a low cry, but she had not strength to reach him, and would have fallen with her child, but that half a dozen pairs of arms were stretched out to sustain her. They placed her in a chair, and took the child from her gently.

'Who is this woman?' asked Sir Spencer Shelford, as soon as quiet was somewhat restored in the room.

'Rachael Summer, whose child I thought he there, her only friend on earth, had destroyed!' cried Mrs. Withers. 'O, Will, say that you forgive me!'

'God forgive you as truly as I do,' cried Will; 'but if you would make me any return, see to her.'

'What have you to say in the face of this evidence?' demanded Mr. Twiner of Easby, who had stood, pale and discomfited, watching the scene.

'I say I've been wrong, deceived, a darn'd

fool, who has well deserved the hiding he got for his pains.'

'You withdraw the charge against this poor fellow, then?'

'And wish to God I'd never made it!' cried Easby with almost startling energy.

'Prisoner, you are discharged,' said Mr. Twiner. 'Officer, clear the room;' and without losing a moment he contrived to hurry Sir Spencer Shelford into his private consulting room, before that worthy had time to interfere with his decision.

CHAPTER XVI.

PAST HOPE.

Mr. Twiner's order to have the room cleared was speedily carried out as regarded the crowd; but Rachael's condition made her instant removal impossible. Seated in the chair into which she had been helped, she remained supported by the arms of one or two women, but with closed eyes, and speechless, and apparently unconscious of all that was passing about her. Mrs. Withers, pale, tearful, and looking ten years older than when she had sternly turned her back upon poor Will and his house of trouble, stood a few paces removed, endeavouring to hush the fretful cry of the child she was nursing.

Bending over her, and holding one of her hands gently, Will spoke soothingly to Rachael;

but she made no sign of recognising either his voice or touch.

'Cheer up, Rachael,' he said; 'all is over now, and no harm has come to me. See, here is your child! For his sake, try and rouse yourself.'

She returned no answer, exhibited no sign of consciousness; and but that she still breathed, he would have thought her dead.

His cottage was at least a mile distant from Sir Spencer Shelford's justice-room, and the difficulty of conveying her back to her bed at first seemed insurmountable; it was got over, however, by the well-timed and sympathetic assistance of Master Eben. Smith, the farrier, who volunteered the use of his donkey-cart, in which vehicle, followed by half the village, she was reconveyed to the shelter of Will's roof.

At the earnest entreaty of Mrs. Withers, Mr. Squills hurried to Rachael's bedside, characteristically grumbling by the way as the particulars of his patient's late movements were reported to him.

'Ought to have been kept perfectly quiet,' he cried; 'and — confound you and your squeamish notions of propriety!—*you* ought to have been with her, to see that she was kept so. Nine-tenths of a doctor's troubles come from people who *won't* follow the directions given them. Why the deuce do people send for a doctor at all, if they have made up their idiotic minds *not* to do as he tells them?'

'God forgive me for leaving her!' groaned Mrs. Withers; 'but I thought it was my duty.'

'Your duty to yourself, of course!' cried Mr. Squills snappishly. 'Paugh! the word makes me sick: it nearly always means people giving themselves abominable airs and graces over somebody else. Suppose this wretched girl dies, as most likely she will, what will you think of your duty then?'

'I shall never forgive myself!' sobbed Mrs. Withers.

'And much good that will do to any one! When you found the child was safe, why the

deuce couldn't *you* manage matters, without letting her drag herself all the way to Sir Spencer Shelford's? By God, woman, it's little short of wilful murder!'

'Indeed, indeed, Mr. Squills!' she cried pleadingly, 'when I went back to her, and told her I had seen her child safe and well, I could not pacify her till I had gone to Mrs. Rickson's and brought it to her; and then, when she clutched her baby in her arms, she seemed as if she was gone out of her senses. She got up and dressed herself, in spite of all I could say to dissuade her; her only care was to prove poor Woodruff's innocence. From the time we left the cottage to the time we got to Sir Spencer Shelford's, she hardly spoke a word; and I think she was hardly conscious of what she was doing.'

'The wilfulness of women!' ejaculated Mr. Squills, at the same moment tempering the intensity of his irritation by the inhalation of a huge pinch of snuff.

By this time he and Mrs. Withers had reached Will's cottage, in the neighbourhood

of which a large knot of villagers, mostly women, loitered, talking over the circumstances of Rachael's case. Mr. Squills made his way right through the group, exclaiming sharply as he went:

'What the dickens do you want here? Do you think the infernal clatter of all your tongues likely to help to save the life of the poor girl in there?'

Without waiting for a reply, he entered the cottage. The gossips immediately surrounded Mrs. Withers, from whom they soon learned the reason both of her reappearance in the village and of her altered feelings towards Rachael.

From the explanation she gave them, it appeared that, on her way out of Abbot's-Nook, she was passing Rickson's farmyard, from the gate of which Mrs. Rickson happened to be coming at the moment. The good-natured farmer's wife had sharply taxed her with ingratitude to Will, and inhumanity to Rachael. In defending herself, she had stated her suspicion of Will's having made

away with his paramour's child. On hearing this, Mrs. Rickson had almost dragged her into the farmhouse, shown her the child, and convinced her, not only of Will's entire innocence, but also of his infinite kindness and humanity towards its unfortunate mother. Stricken with remorse, she had hurried back to the village with the intention of imploring Will's mercy and forgiveness, and had then heard of the charge which was hanging over him, in consequence of the dark report set afloat by herself. How she had gone to Rachael, who had compelled her to fetch the child from Mrs. Rickson's, she had already explained to Mr. Squills.

Released at length from her interrogators, she went into the cottage at the moment Mr. Squills and Will came out from it. The little doctor was looking grave, and nervously wiped the perspiration from his bald forehead, as he hurried away towards his own house, followed by Will.

Will's pale brow was dark and careworn, and his lips close-drawn, as if to keep them

from quivering, and to suppress the groan that pressed for utterance. His hands were tightly clenched within the pockets of his coat. After what had occurred at Sir Spencer Shelford's, the feeling of the village had veered round, and was warmly set in his favour; but at the sight of his manifest though silent suffering, the gossips, not yet dispersed, refrained from addressing a word to him as he passed.

For several minutes, during which time he more than once or twice had recourse to his snuff-box, the worthy doctor walked on briskly in silence—a very unusual thing for him to do.

'This is going to be a bad business, Woodruff,' he said at last, after vigorously wiping his forehead. 'We must do what we can; but I'm afraid that will be very little—very little. That preposterous nonsense up at Sir Spencer Shelford's has gone very near to—to—well, if she gets over it *I* shall be surprised.'

The sight of Rachael's fading condition, and his own instinct of what the end must be, had

fully prepared Will for Mr. Squills' communication. He was none the less touched by the doctor's considerate way of breaking to him the gloomy intelligence.

'I'm deeply grateful to you, sir, for your kindness to the poor girl,' he said, steadying his voice. 'I know that if you could save her, you would.'

'Of course I will—of course I *will*, if she is to be saved; but I'm afraid she's too far gone. The devil take that old woman of yours—Mrs. Withers, I think her confounded name is! If the girl dies, I'll—damme, I'll prosecute her! The whole thing has been her fault.'

'She's bitterly repentant now, sir,' replied Will; 'and her fault was like that of many other good people—she couldn't understand that there could be any goodness that wasn't like her own. She'll try and make up for her hardness now; poor Rachael won't want for nursing now she's by her.'

'Won't want nursing at all, I'm deucedly afraid,' muttered Mr. Squills; 'one more good intention for the use of the paviors below!'

He turned the bright brass handle of a side door to his house and entered, calling loudly the moment his foot was across the threshold,

'Here, Susannah; give this poor fellow some cold meat and a jug of *my* ale. Go into the kitchen, Woodruff, and refresh yourself—make a good meal—while I mix something or other to be given to this unfortunate girl.'

Half-an-hour later Will was on his way back to his cottage with medicine compounded by worthy Mr. Squills, and with directions for its application to the patient's lips at frequent intervals, until she should be restored to consciousness, but in no doubt of the fact that her life was hanging by a thread, which might snap at any moment.

'It may not be to-day or to-morrow,' said Mr. Squills, 'for she has, or had, a fine constitution; but—but, if I saw any hope, I'd give it you; for, by God, that's the least you deserve!'

Will could find no words adequate to the expression of his thankfulness; he could only

take off his hat in silence, and hurry away to hide the tears that at last filled his eyes and overflowed on to his pale cheeks.

'There goes as good a fellow as any I ever met with, gentle or simple, if he isn't a good deal better,' said Mr. Squills to himself, as he watched Will passing down the village; 'and that deaf old fool, Shelford, would have sent him to the gallows with as little remorse as I should prescribe a blue pill and black draught.'

The conversation of the parlour company of the Red Lion was particularly bright and varied that evening, turning naturally in the first place, upon the breakdown of the charge against Will Woodruff. Poor Mr. Sifter was hard put to it to hold his own against the combined jocular onslaught of Mr. Squills and Mr. Gattens, who had neither of them forgotten the very high-handed treatment they had received at the lawyer's hands the night before. It required all the tact of the host to keep his good company under the sway of good temper.

A second topic, on which the conversation flowed as freely, though with less sparkle, was that of the return of the Allgrip family to the Hall, which had been announced some short time previously. The arrangements made during Marten's convalescence for his marriage with the Honourable Miss Downhill had been carried out, and, after a brief tour in Scotland, the newly-wedded couple were returning to their fixed abode. The young squire had not made himself popular. The *quorum* had fallen off somewhat in its allegiance; hence there was much less curiosity and infinitely less excitement caused by the anticipation of his return than had been felt and exhibited on the occasion of the Allgrip family's first arrival at Abbot's-Nook. No one now talked of triumphal arches or even of a congratulatory address. The event, however, was to be celebrated by a tenants' dinner and ball, to be given on the evening of Marten's return with his wife, and under the management of Mrs. Allgrip, to whom her son left all the arrangement; invitations were so

distributed that nobody of any standing in the village or its neighbourhood was omitted.

Late in the evening of the second day after the breakdown of the charge against Will, and while death was momently nearing the bed of the unhappy woman he had so nobly protected, Marten Allgrip's splendid mansion was *en fête.*

CHAPTER XVII.

LIGHT AND SHADOW.

LIGHT and revelry at the Hall—the shadow of death in the cottage.

Rachael had returned to consciousness, and knew that her last moments were near. Will sat by her bedside in the feeble twilight of the one poor candle, which burned on the mantelpiece of the room in which she was lying. She had spoken little during the day, but as night closed in, a certain restlessness had taken possession of her mind, and Will watched her anxiously.

'Will, Will,' she said, suddenly breaking silence, and with feverish earnestness, 'I know you are by me, though you keep so still and the room is so dark. I am going, Will—going very soon, and I must speak to you while I have the power left to speak.'

He took her thin and nerveless hand in his, and gently pressed it.

'Tell me you forgive me, Will,' she said after a pause—'forgive me for all the misery I have caused you by my wickedness!'

'Don't say that of yourself, Rachael; you were never wicked—only wilful and ignorant of the wickedness of others, and so let yourself be made the victim of a villain more knowing than yourself. I have nothing to forgive *you*.'

She lapsed into silence again, as if her mind had wandered; then, speaking hurriedly, she said:

'I have been burden enough to you, Will; when I am gone, you must not be burdened with my child. You must make me a promise, Will.'

'If it concerns your child, do not distress yourself about him; while I have a crust he shall share it with me.'

'No, Will, no,' she whispered, with eager tremulousness; 'the father of my child is bound to take care of it. He is rich, and

you are poor; so poor that you find it hard to get bread enough for your own lips. You must promise me, Will—for I cannot die with the thought in my mind that I am leaving such a burden on your life—that you will make Mr. Allgrip provide for his child. *I* have never but once appealed to him, and then he spurned me; but his child—his child he *must* support. Promise me you will see that he does his duty by my poor boy. Promise me—promise—'

Her voice, which had been eager and hurried at the outset of this appeal, though scarcely raised above a whisper, grew so faint as the last words left her lips that the syllables were hardly distinguishable to Will through the beatings of his heart, and the pressure of her hand relaxed in his.

His first impulse had been to dissuade her from making any demand on the squire; to point out to her that, in all probability, he would indignantly repudiate the paternity of her child; but he shrank from saying any-

thing that could possibly disturb her last moments.

'I cannot hear you, Will,' she whispered; 'but you promise—you promise to make him do his duty by his child? I ask only this of you, to enable me to die in quiet.'

'I *will* do as you wish,' he said, bending down and speaking close to her face.

'God bless you,' she said, in a dreamy tone. 'It is a long while since I have felt so light. I must be dying now. If you would only kiss me once more, dear Will, I should die quite—quite happy.'

He threw himself noiselessly on his knees by her bedside, and took both her insensible hands in his own, and kissed her tenderly upon the mouth; but her lips made no response; the eyes he looked into were void of light. Rachael had passed away — in peace.

Will was in no doubt that the final moment had come and gone; that the one great love and sorrow of his life had become a

memory only. A fierce outburst of tears relieved his overstrained heart, and then he rose and went into the kitchen, where Mrs. Withers was seated with the child asleep upon her lap. A glance at his red eyes told her what had happened.

'God be merciful to her, poor misguided girl,' she said, with trembling lips, 'and watch over her parentless child.'

The word parentless called forcibly to his mind Rachael's earnestly expressed wish and his solemn promise; and he replied, with darkened brow,

'Motherless, but not parentless.'

'As bad, poor child, I'm afraid; with a father who will disown it.'

'That is yet to be seen,' replied Will hoarsely. 'Go and fetch in one of the neighbours to—to help you, while I think of what is to be done.'

Mrs. Withers went out, and presently returned with Mrs. Edglin, the constable's wife, who aided her in performing the last offices about the death-bed, Will the while sitting

thoughtfully by the hearth and nursing the still sleeping child.

Marten's heartless treatment of his victim presented itself in the blackest aspect to his mind, as he thought of the wreck of Rachael's life, and of his own destroyed happiness; and it seemed to him a monstrous injustice that the guilty selfishness which had been the cause of all this ruin should go unscathed. That Marten would deny his responsibility with regard to Rachael's child he fully anticipated; but that he should not do so with impunity, he was determined.

By the time Mrs. Withers returned to relieve him of the child, after the gloomy duties towards the dead had been performed, he had made up his mind as to the course he intended to take.

This course was to carry the child at once to Marten, and claim from him its recognition. He knew that the squire had returned to the Hall on the previous night, and that at the moment of his premeditated visit the house was filled with festive company. Some-

thing like a feeling of vindictiveness had rapidly developed in his mind: to confront Marten and shame him in the midst of his tenants, guests, and dependents seemed to him less an act of vengeance than one of justice to the memory of the woman this man's heartlessness had hurried to the grave.

The firm determination expressed in his face advertised Mrs. Withers that no dissuasion would turn him from the purpose he had explained to her. Silently, therefore, she wrapped up the child, and saw Will take his way through the darkness towards the Hall.

His way lay across the common, by the rustic bridge over the beck, on which he had first learned with clear certainty the relations of the young squire with the woman he was deluding to her ruin. All the bitterest recollections of the past twelve months came back upon his mind, and doubly confirmed it in the stern purpose on which he was bent.

He crossed the fence-stile by which he had seen Marten and Rachael come out of

the park, and strode with unshaken resolution through the wood towards the house and illuminated grounds surrounding it.

At the moment when Will Woodruff entered the park, Marten and his principal guests had not yet left the dinner-table, which had been spread in a large tent on the lawn on one side of the house. The speeches and toasts had long been got through; but the attraction of superabundant wine had been sufficient to keep the party from joining the ladies in the drawing-rooms of the Hall.

On the greensward, facing the grand entrance, a gay and numerous set were dancing to the *traînant* music of a full military band, obtained by favour of the commanding officer of a regiment quartered in the county town. Festoons of bright-coloured lamps were hung between the trees, and gave the dancers ample light. The entertainments were to close with a great display of fireworks on the lake. Mrs. Allgrip might have fairly congratulated herself on the entire success of her arrangements.

Keeping in the shade as much as possible, so as to avoid attracting inconvenient notice, either from the guests or the servants in attendance upon them, Will approached the tent from the back, and listened to the sounds of mingled voices that reached his ears through the canvas. For some little time he failed to recognise any of the speakers, and was on the point of turning away, with the intention of going round to the entrance of the tent, when the tones of Marten's well-remembered voice arrested him.

'Gentlemen,' said Marten, speaking thickly, 'the ladies have sent to say that they are getting impatient for our society. Another bumper of champagne before we join them!'

There was a great jingling of glasses and general movement of the party, who then passed from the tent in straggling knots across the lawn towards a side-entrance to the house.

For a moment Will debated what he should do—only for a moment. He saw clearly that if he permitted Marten to pass into the in-

terior of the Hall, there would be no chance of accosting him. Hurrying forward, therefore, so as to reach the entrance before Marten, who loitered on the way to speak to some of the persons on the lawn, he succeeded in getting into the Hall unchallenged.

A number of the guests went up the stairs, laughing and talking, without regarding him; and in the course of a few minutes Marten entered in the midst of a knot of persons, and was also about to pass up the stairs. Will stepped before him and barred his passage.

The action was so sudden, and so entirely unexpected, that for a moment Marten was startled, and fell back a pace. Instantly recovering his self-possession, however, though he was considerably under the influence of wine, he demanded:

'Who the devil are you, fellow; and what business have you here?'

'Rachael Summer died to-night — that is the business that brings me here,' replied Will hoarsely.

'What have I to do with the woman's death?' cried Marten with increasing anger, as he recognised the man confronting him, pale and trembling with suppressed passion. 'Why do you come to me?'

'To bring you her last words,' replied Will firmly.

'You are drunk, fellow, I suspect,' exclaimed Marten. 'Take yourself off, or some of my people will have to lay hands on you. I remember you — a blackguard who once had the audacity to threaten me!'

'I wish I had carried out my threat,' cried Will; 'I might then have saved a poor girl from ruin! But I've something more to do than threaten now. I've told you I am come to bring you Rachael Summer's last words: they were that I should call on you to do your duty by your child. Here it is!'

As he spoke he opened his coat and gently laid the sleeping and well wrapped-up child on a large table at Marten's side.

'The lying harlot!' cried Marten, beside himself with rage, 'the child is none of mine.

Take it away, or I'll have you and it thrown into the highway together! Be off, scoundrel!'

'The only scoundrel here is yourself, Marten Allgripp! and, once more, I warn you how you talk of laying hands on me, your better in everything that goes to make a man!'

'By God, we'll see that!' yelled Marten, now perfectly furious. 'Take this infernal brat out of my house, or I'll fling it out of yonder door, and you after it!'

The entrance hall in which this shameful scene was passing was by this time filled with spectators, all of whom were too completely dumbfounded by the peculiarity of the situation to interfere.

'Touch the child in that way at your peril!' cried Will, seizing Marten by the collar as he rushed forward, apparently with the intention of carrying out the first portion of his atrocious threat.

Almost frenzied at he had now become, Marten was deaf to the warning given him.

With tiger-like fury he seized Will by the throat and tried to throttle him. There was a moment's struggle—so brief that none of the bystanders had time to interpose — and then, by the exercise of all his strength, Will succeeded in wrenching the murderous grip from his windpipe and dashed his antagonist backwards from him.

Marten appeared to be sent flying through the air, and fell with terrific force, his head striking against one of the lower marble stairs. He never stirred after falling, and in a few seconds a wide stream of blood was seen to well from under his shattered skull. He was dead.

That Will had killed him by mischance, and acting purely in self-defence, twenty of the horrified spectators were bound to affirm; nevertheless he was detained until the arrival of the village constable, by whom he was conveyed to the round house, or lock-up, for the night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE END OF THE STORY.

The startling news of the squire's death spread through the entire village, advanced as the hour was, and reached the ears of Farmer Rickson, who, for peculiar reasons, was sitting late in the parlour of the Red Lion, of which he found himself almost the only guest, the chief *habitués* of that genteel place of convivial resort having all been favoured with invitations to the Hall. He was not in the least sorry for the fate of his landlord, but he was heartily sorry for Will.

It was past twelve when he left the Red Lion, and by that time Abbot's-Nook had settled down, so that, after passing into the road leading to his house, he met nobody on his way. His mind was busily occupied

with certain matters which would have more than slightly astonished a good large majority of the *quorum* had they been brought to the cognisance of the respectable individuals composing it.

Arrived at a point where a lane branched off from the road he was pursuing, he paused, and after listening attentively, leaning against a closed field-gate, whistled with assumed carelessness a few bars of the popular air of 'Will Watch, the bold smuggler.'

In the course of a few seconds the whistle was answered and a voice, approaching from behind a hedge, asked in a low tone,

'Is that you, Rickson?'

'Is that you, Gattens?' replied Rickson.

The next moment Mr. Gattens emerged from the deep shadow in which he had been shrouded and clambered over the gate.

'All seems quiet,' remarked Mr. Gattens. 'The carts will be at the old spot in half an hour; three—two of brandy and hollands, one of silks and lace. Is all ready at your place?'

'Quite; and everybody asleep. Is Van Steen coming with the carts to-night, do you know?'

'Certain to, I think,' replied Mr. Gattens.

From the tenor of this brief conversation it will be readily surmised that the highly respectable Mr. Gattens was at that moment engaged with Mr. Rickson, ostensibly a farmer, in the prosecution of some sort of contraband dealing. The simple fact was that, at that particular time, half the barns in the county were used as receptacles and hiding-places for goods smuggled from the coast of Holland; and that Mr. Gattens with his wife and comely daughters were highly successful agents in this dangerous and nefarious kind of commerce, in conjunction with Rickson, whose secret was accidentally discovered a few months later by the burning of his barn, which was then found to be a large store of smuggled spirits and very little unthreshed corn, though the building had always appeared to be filled to the roof with unthreshed sheaves.

Walking on together slowly to a point

where the lane passed through a thickly-grown pine wood, Mr. Gattens, who had been one of the guests at the Hall, and had witnessed Marten's death, related all the particulars of the event to Rickson, whose only comment in regard to the squire was, 'Serve the blackguard right!'

With regard to Will, however, an idea had been shaping itself in his mind; and it was in reference to this idea that he had inquired whether Van Steen — that is to say, the Dutch captain of the vessel the cargo of which was to be 'run' that night—was likely to come inland with the carts carrying the smuggled goods. This idea he communicated to Mr. Gattens, who at once warmly espoused it.

Small as the danger was of Will's being convicted of wilfully causing Marten's death, he would have to stand his trial, and when released, would inevitably find himself in a worse position than ever in his native village. Rickson had no doubt that Will would view the matter in this light, and would only be

too thankful for any help given him to better his condition.

What Rickson proposed to do—and Mr. Gattens heartily agreed to aid him in carrying out his project, as soon as the smuggled goods had been safely stored—was to set Will at liberty, by forcing open the lock-up, and then introducing him to Captain Van Steen, to whom, from his knowledge of the county, he might be of great service in the running of cargoes inland.

The scheme was carried out without difficulty, and with perfect success. Before dawn, Will, who had gratefully suffered himself to be guided by the advice of the man who alone had befriended him in the midst of his troubles, was on board the swift lugger Zaandam, bound for Rotterdam.

Under the guidance of Will, many a rich cargo was safely carried inland; but at length, one dark night on the coast off Lowestoft, Captain Van Steen's good fortune deserted him; his lugger was sighted by a revenue cutter, chased, fired into, and sunk. Every

soul on board perished, Will Woodruff among the number.

Little remains to be told. Rachael was buried in a pauper's grave, as her father before her had been. Her child was provided for by Marten's widow, and, perhaps happily, died in its infancy.

Lady Downhill grew stone deaf, and would no doubt have worried her unfortunate daughter to death, if Letitia had not amply provided for her and kept her as much as possible at a distance. She lived to be ninety; a proof that goodness and long life do not necessarily go together. That the gods did *not* love Lady Downhill was certain.

Mrs. Allgrip married the Rev. Mr. Ghills, who shortly took to drinking, and it was freely reported in the county, ruled his wife with a 'rod of iron'—with such strictness, at all events, as first to break her spirit, and finally to hasten her end.

After awhile the reverend widower proposed for the hand of Letitia; but that lady's experience of matrimony had not been of a

kind to lead her to make a second sacrifice of herself. To the infinite surprise of the *quorum*, Marten's widow remained a widow.

The story is told. All that need be said for it is, that fifty or sixty years ago, in the village-life of 'merrie England,' such stories were Common as Earth.

THE END.

LONDON:
ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

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3 0112 055289133